

(INTER)FACING EMPATHY: INTERROGATING OUR TRAGIC LOVE AFFAIR WITH SCREENS

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ABSTRACT

Screen technologies, ranging from the cinema to the smartphone, are taken for granted in the contemporary screen landscape. This landscape has been referred to as the “screen-sphere” (Sobchack 2014) owing to the fundamental ways screens affect how people understand and relate to the world around them. It is particularly their structural and operative functioning as interfaces that influence not so much how we use screens, but, more importantly, how they affect our communication with and feelings towards others. In so doing, the screen as an interface profoundly transforms people’s capacity for empathy. This article exposes the intersection of the screen and the face of the celebrity persona in an artwork by Candice Breitz titled Love Story (2016). Since the installation focuses attention on the faces of its subjects, it utilises the enormous power of the face in generating empathic responses. More specifically, the face of the celebrity persona cultivates both fascination and empathy in this work. Through a close analysis of this installation, I aim to show how empathy can be controlled and manipulated just as much as it can be compromised due to our screen-based day-to-day practices and our interactions with the faces of others. This article also demonstrates the crucial role that an artwork can play in raising awareness about the consequences of screens on our empathic resonance with others.

KEY WORDS

Screen-sphere; Empathy; Interface; Cinematic Screen; Face; Celebrity

INTRODUCTION

In her provocative installation titled *Love Story* (2016), Candice Breitz exposes people’s tendency to be more interested in looking at (and keenly listening to) the familiar faces of celebrity personas than they are in the plight of nameless people describing their own suffering as a result of migration and displacement. By employing clever design strategies, the artist choreographs the audience’s movements through the installation, thereby ‘tricking’ them into *feeling with* the famous Hollywood celebrities, Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin. By contrast, these same strategies compromise the audience’s ability to empathise with the unknown migrants. In this way, the installation powerfully exposes the audience’s love affair with the “exceptionalism” (Breitz in Weiss 2017) of the celebrity personas on whom star-status has already been bestowed. The installation, therefore, coerces audiences into publicly performing their love story – or empathic resonance – with celebrities at the expense of unfamiliar others. After realising what has occurred, audiences potentially experience guilt or embarrassment.

In this article I aim to show that *Love Story* implicitly also deals with another type of love affair, namely, people’s attraction to screens. Digital technologies like smartphones, tablets,

laptops, and desktops increasingly dominate everyday life to the extent that, for many individuals, their closest and most intimate connection might very well be with a digital screen. It is now common for people to engage with a digital device first thing in the morning and last thing at night before going to bed. Among numerous other things, our digital devices entertain us, provide us with information about the weather or our location, and answer our questions (Alderman 2017). People believe that having a nearby digital device boosts efficiency, knowledge of world events, and connection with others (Turkle 2015, p. 48). It could be suggested then that, in some ways, people's relationships with digital screens resemble a love affair.

The sheer abundance of screens in people's lives leads Vivian Sobchack (2014) to argue that we live in a "screen-sphere". In the screen-sphere, the inherent differences between screens of various kinds have become trivial as they converge and blur our understanding of them as separate entities. Sobchack (2014), however, wonders what happens to the differences and connections between screens when "the cinema screen is now a television screen is now a computer screen is now a tablet screen is now a smartphone screen is now a 'smart eyewear' screen – and vice-versa". Our love affair with screens has meant that they have become a taken-for-granted (meaning invisible) part of our everyday lives. However, just because screens have become invisible to users does not mean they are inconsequential. Instead, their invisibility necessitates considering how their structural and organising properties – whether of the contemporary 'smart' screen or their forerunners, the cinema and television screen – affect how we respond to the content they mediate. The almost ubiquitous presence of screens in our lives has fundamentally affected how we think about ourselves, others, and our world (Frosch 2018, p. 353). Some commentators have argued that the dominance of a multitude of screens in our lives leads to the inability to read other people's emotions (Turkle 2015, p. 48). Thus, we might pessimistically conclude that our relationship with screens does not resemble a love affair as much as a tragedy.

This article aims to show the effects of the screen-sphere on our ability to empathise with the personal suffering of others. The arguments presented here contribute to the field of persona studies by examining how an artwork exposes the effects of the circulation and mediation of celebrity personas versus everyday personas on people's ability to *feel with* others. This article demonstrates an artwork's impact in raising awareness about the consequences of cinematic and digital screens on our lives. Furthermore, since the installation focuses attention on the faces of its subjects, I show the enormous power of the face in orchestrating empathy. In short, I explore the role of the screen and the celebrity's face in *interfacing* empathy.

I begin with a close description of *Love Story*, whereafter I offer a brief definition of the concepts of empathy and interface, respectively. This is followed by a discussion of empathy and the screen. In my discussion of cinematic empathy, I also show the significance of the celebrity persona in cultivating both fascination and empathy in the public. Finally, I discuss the magnetic power of the face as an interface for empathy.

CLOSE DESCRIPTION OF *LOVE STORY*(2016)

Candice Breitz's installation *Love Story* was exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2017, which is also where I encountered it. The work comprised a total of seven screens split between two interconnecting rooms. In the first room, the faces of Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin were projected onto a large screen from which they addressed the audience (Figure 1 & Figure 2). The dark room, with the screen placed prominently on one wall and seating in front, closely resembled a movie theatre. Looking directly at us, the two actors recounted horrific details of

their suffering and abuse at the hands of powerful authorities. With the camera focussing on their upper bodies, especially their faces, it appeared as if we were watching two celebrities recounting personal stories in an interview setting. As their stories disjointedly jumped from one recollection to another, the overall effect resembled a Hollywood montage and did not form a coherent narrative.



Figure 1: Candice Breitz. *Love Story*, 2016. Featuring Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin. 7-Channel Installation. Installation View: South African Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2017. Photograph: Andrea Rossetti. Courtesy: Candice Breitz.



Figure 2: Candice Breitz. *Love Story*, 2016. Featuring Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin. 7-Channel Installation. Installation View: South African Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2017. Photograph: Andrea Rossetti. Courtesy: Candice Breitz.

While initially entranced by the supposedly 'real' and private stories of these celebrities, after a few minutes, the audience realised that the abusive situations they described could not possibly have been actually experienced by Moore and Baldwin and that they had been acting after all. To fully comprehend the actors' discussion, the spectator had to move through a doorway and enter a second room. This room housed six LCD monitors placed side-by-side, and displayed

interviews conducted with six individuals who had fled from their home countries due to intolerable conditions (Figure 3). Once the installation was experienced in its entirety, it became clear that Moore and Baldwin were performing snippets from the personal narratives of these six refugees.



Figure 3: Candice Breitz, *Love Story*, 2016. Featuring Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin. Left to Right: Shabeena Francis Saveri, Mamy Maloba Langa, Sarah Mardini, Farah Mohamed, José Maria João, Luis Ernesto Nava Molero. 7-Channel Installation. Installation View: South African Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2017. Photograph: Andrea Rossetti. Courtesy: Candice Breitz.

Love Story deals with several important issues. Its main topic is the “so-called ‘refugee crisis’” (Breitz in Weiss 2017) and the plight of people who have suffered and are still suffering as a result of war and the turmoil caused by oppressive regimes. Breitz (in Weiss 2017) wanted to emphasise both the global nature and immense scale of the crisis of displacement and draw attention to the variety of reasons people leave their home countries. For this reason, she interviewed six refugees who were seeking asylum in three geographically distant locations, namely Germany, the USA, and South Africa. In Cape Town, Breitz interviewed José Maria João, a former child soldier, and Mamy Maloba Langa from the Congo. Luis Ernesto Nava Molero from Venezuela and Shabena Francis Saveri from Mumbai were interviewed in New York. Breitz’s interviews with Farah Abdi Mohamed from Somalia, and Sarah Ezzat Mardini from Syria, took place in Berlin (Weiss 2017).

On closer reflection, it is evident that Breitz is not only commenting on a pertinent political issue and its social and economic ramifications, but also on how asylum seekers are depicted in the media. For such depictions shape how audiences respond to them. At the Venice Biennale people watched and listened intently to Moore and Baldwin performing other people’s stories. Even after realising that the actors were not speaking about their own experiences, for the most part, the audience was quite visibly spellbound by them, with some people making themselves comfortable on the benches placed in front of the screen. By contrast, in the second room, one could only hear each interviewee speak while putting on headphones. Unlike in the first room, where the audience immediately heard Moore’s and Baldwin’s voices even before entering the room, the second room contained only six silent, unfamiliar faces. And even if audiences did put on the headphones, they would have had to listen to the same stories that the actors had already told. In this way, Breitz carefully choreographed viewers’ movements through the installation and the attention they gave to the celebrities versus the migrants. The choreography of the audience’s empathic responses – or lack thereof – was also facilitated in no

small measure by the fact that it would have taken 22 hours to watch all the interviews. Thus, even if this installation is displayed in a conventional gallery where there might be only a few artworks on display, (and not in the massive exhibition space of the Venice Biennale where thousands of artworks vie for attention), few people would have the stamina to listen to all the interviews.

By manipulating the viewer into spending less time listening to the refugees than the Hollywood stars, Breitz exposed how people's reactions to information about the immigration crisis often tend toward apathy or disinterest (Greenberg 2017). Breitz (in Weiss 2017) explains that she "wanted Alec and Julianne to almost bait you into a relationship with the stories, to invite you to consider the distance between the stories as Alec and Julianne tell them, and the remoteness of having to hear that same set of six stories now relayed to you at a slower pace, in less-perfect English, certainly less entertainingly". By using two high-profile, successful, white, celebrities to perform the stories of the refugees, the artist is clearly critiquing the general public's willingness to give more time and attention to well-known public personas than to the suffering of real people. In this sense, *Love Story* explicitly deals with how the media manipulates empathy in its publics. In the discussion that follows, however, I will show how the work implicitly also comments on the contemporary screen-sphere and its effect on our capacity to empathise with others. Furthermore, I show how the face itself might contribute to the audience's empathic resonance with Moore's and Baldwin's public personas, thereby significantly adding to the intensity of the installation.

EMPATHY DEFINED

Since my focus is on how *Love Story* exposes the audience's empathic connection with others, or lack thereof, I begin with a brief definition of the concept. Empathy denotes how people come to understand the inner life and emotions of others. The contemporary concept of empathy is rooted in art criticism and the German term *Einfühlung*. In 1873, art historian Robert Vischer, influenced by nineteenth-century German aesthetics, used *Einfühlung* to describe the process of feeling oneself in works of art (Jardine & Szanto 2019, p. 86). Three decades later, Theodor Lipps, the German philosopher and psychologist, used the term to describe how one feels oneself into another person so that the distinction between self and other dissolves (Stadler 2019, p. 321). In 1909, Edward Titchener translated the concept of *Einfühlung* into English as "empathy" (Matravers 2019, p. 77). Empathy, thus, came to denote the experience of 'feeling into' an aesthetic object, a natural setting, or someone else's subjective experience. Although there is still a great deal of debate about the exact process and nature of empathy, philosophers and psychologists usually emphasise that "empathy is an experiential way of approximating what another person is thinking, feeling, and/or doing from a quasi-first-person point of view, and that this process involves emotional, cognitive, and imaginative aspects" (Hollan 2019, p. 342).

Since first coming into wide use in art and psychology, the concept of empathy has figured strongly in discourses on images. To understand people's empathic responses to art, Vischer maintained that viewers' connections with artworks take both bodily and cognitive forms (Koss 2006, p. 139). Developments in neuroscience in the late twentieth century expands on Vischer's ideas by evidencing the bodily basis of viewer's empathic connection with images. The discovery of the mirror-neuron system combined with Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) technology has allowed scientists to map how the brain responds to stimulation and has "shed light on the ways in which we empathize with others" (Freedberg & Gallese 2007, p. 198). This discovery has also allowed art historians to make claims about the automatic neural basis of empathy and embodiment in aesthetic experience (Freedberg & Gallese 2007;

Esrock 2010). In other words, scholars are now able to pinpoint the scientific basis for how viewers might be moved to tears, or feel pain, or otherwise resonate with images.

Studies on empathic resonance also pointed out that our capacity to empathise with others can be manipulated. Freedberg and Gallese (2007, p. 202) argue that the extent to which viewers might have an empathic response to an artwork owes a great deal to the artist's skill in directing and controlling such responses. Breitz's skill in manipulating the audience's empathic response is evident in *Love Story*. The artist explicitly utilises the cinema screen and the television or computer monitor on which people might watch films, news broadcasts, television series, documentaries and so forth. I would argue that implicitly, the installation also refers to our everyday use of smartphones, iPads and tablets by staying connected to world affairs such as the plight of refugees. *Love Story*, thus, comments on the presence of screens in our everyday activities and their power in mediating our responses to the world around us and other people. In this sense, screens interface empathy.

THE SCREEN AS INTERFACE

As I have already pointed out, Sobchack (2014) contends that today we live in a "screen-sphere" which has replaced the "screen-scape" of a few decades ago. This is because the screen technologies that surround us have both increased in number and variety, and in the process, they have changed us. In the screen-sphere, people live "primarily in and through screens rather than merely on or with them" (Sobchack 2014), which has fundamentally altered contemporary life's topological domain. In describing our absorbed and absorbing interactions with screen technologies, Christian Voss (2011, p. 139) maintains that we live in an "osmotic exchange" with screens. They have become our lifeworld and the primary means through which "our very existence is affirmed" (Sobchack 2014). Not only do screens affirm our existence but they have also changed our "modes of knowing and being-in-the-world" (Sobchack 2014). In short, screen technologies have fundamentally shaped how people engage with the content they view (Frosch 2018, p. 353), and they have also changed how we interact with others (Turkle 2015, p. 206).

The nature of our interaction and engagement with screens shows that screens have been transformed into interfaces. Interfaces are communication boundaries and participate in cultural ways of representing and organising information and knowledge. Thus, interfaces are not transparent windows into another world; they are themselves producers of meanings. Through their "structural and operative connections" (Sobchack 2014), screens have reshaped human thought, interaction, and communication.

Since the term 'interface' became popular in computer science in the 1960s, there has been a tendency to understand interfaces as belonging only to computer and phone technologies. However, an interface may also be understood in non-technological ways. The roots of the interface go as far back as medieval urban planning, Victorian novels, and early cinema (Jeong 2013, p. 4). In fact, Lev Manovich (1997, p. 6) has argued that cinema is an interface because it has "developed its own unique ways of how information is organised, how it is presented to the user, how space and time are correlated with each other, [and] how human experience is being structured in the process of accessing information." In other words, because cinema uses distinctive techniques to express human memories and experiences through audio-visual narratives that take place in a three-dimensional space, the cinema is an interface. The cinema screen and digital screens all function as interfaces and thinking about them as such assists in understanding how empathy is both cultivated and compromised in these media and also how *Love Story* exposes these consequences.

EMPATHY AND THE DIGITAL SCREEN

Small hand-held digital devices such as iPads and smartphones accompany us wherever we go, presumably enabling constant connection with others and to the world around us. In this sense, they appear to enable intimate, though mediated, “co-presence” with distant others (Madianou 2016, p. 183). However, the “operative characteristics” (Frosch 2018, p.365) of digital interfaces affect the attention they are able to command from their audiences. For example, they also distract and distance us from what we are viewing onscreen.

Writing about people’s reception of and engagement with digitised Holocaust survivor testimonies, Paul Frosch (2018, p. 351) worries that the affordances of the digital interface “threaten” empathic responses to the content people watch. As Frosch (2018, p. 359) observes, when watching such testimonies on a digital device, a viewer’s attention is constantly distracted. Because these devices are usually connected to the Internet, distractions include notifications about new emails or messages received and banners from news broadcasters. This means that watching a video about a survivor’s suffering on a digital device is characterised by “continuous partial attention” (Frosch 2018, p. 359). While the digital device might be more intimate than other types of screens (such as cinema) because it is literally held in the hands, it is also more alienating from experiences of empathy. As Casetti (2020, p. 106) argues, “the screen of our optical devices, from the TV set to the computer” is a filter and a protection. This is because “what appears on the surface is just an image that selects only [a] few traits from reality and does not expose us to a direct engagement with it” (Casetti 2020, p.106). Thus, we interact with what the screen delivers from a safe distance.

Like so many other platforms, the constant scroll feature on online news platforms results in relentless scrolling from one news item to the next, without ever reaching the end or any real depth. Mesmerised by the continuous availability of information, people scroll to the next story to “keep the game going” (Kingwell 2019, p. 108). The ubiquitous presence of advertisements interspersed with news feeds also means that our “desire cannot seem to fix itself on any given object or action” (Kingwell 2019, p. 51). Instead, we find ourselves in an “endless quest to find *satisfaction* from the scrolling” (Kingwell 2019, p. 136, emphasis in original), rather than in the content. Delivering “instant gratification, a fast pace, and unpredictability” (Turkle 2015, p. 48), the very nature of news and social media sites teaches our brains to crave multitasking. However, instead of getting better at multitasking, we merely get addicted to it. Our navigation in the world has become focused on surface, with very little depth, thereby compromising our capacity to empathise with others.

Long before the availability of digital screens and the constant connection to world affairs, Susan Sontag (2001) noted that because images have the power to overwhelm, they can also reduce people’s emotional responses to the suffering of others. Writing about her reactions to seeing photographs from Nazi concentration camps, Sontag (2001, p. 19) noticed that despite being deeply moved by the photographs, repeated exposure to images of suffering also lessened their “quality of feeling” and reduced her ability to respond with moral outrage. Later, Sontag (2003) wrote that “compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers”.

Owing to the ubiquity of the screen in our lives, we have become (over)exposed to news stories that represent catastrophes and suffering (Frosch 2018, p. 355). Just as Sontag anecdotally noted the decline of emotional involvement after repeatedly viewing images of suffering – or “compassion fatigue” (Kinnick et al. 1996, p. 687) as it has been referred to – endlessly scrolling through online news articles about tragic events decreases our ability to respond with empathy. While compassion and empathy are not the same, repeatedly witnessing

images and stories about other people's suffering, has a potentially numbing effect. The diminished capacity to empathise, combined with the satisfaction gained from scrolling to the next headline, means that we neglect to ask questions about the circumstances that led to the problem, who the stakeholders are, and what the situation on the ground actually looks like (Turkle 2015, p. 278). As a result, we might mistake curiosity for empathy.

Communicating with others mainly through screens also means that people can avoid face-to-face conversation, leading to a "crisis of empathy" (Turkle 2015, p. 17). Turkle argues that "technology is implicated in an assault on empathy" (2015, p. 12) because devices now mediate our relationships with others. Our smartphones have trained us not only to crave distraction, entertainment and the allure of (what turns out to be false and superficial) connection but also to avoid face-to-face conversations. And according to Turkle (2015, p. 28), even when we do meet with others in person, our phones are usually nearby. The mere presence of a phone in a face-to-face situation influences what people talk about. Since the phone might, at any moment, deliver the next snippet of news, it may inhibit deep conversation and meaningful connections with others. While the arguments above have shown that digital interfaces, by their very nature diminish our capacity for empathy, the cinema, on the other hand – where stars of the silver screen are born – presents the ideal space for cultivating empathy.

EMPATHY AND THE CINEMA SCREEN

The manipulation and fabrication of empathy are perhaps nowhere more visible than on the cinematic interface where the potential of the moving image to produce an emotional connection with the audience was quickly recognised. Early writers on cinema, such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, noted such emotional resonance between viewers and the screen by exploring the effects of cinema on spectator's physical, sensate bodies. For instance, Walter Benjamin (1935/1969, p. 17) wrote about the "tactile quality" of film, which periodically "assail[s] the spectator". Similarly, Kracauer noted the unique ability of cinema to stimulate viewers physiologically and sensually. He wrote that "the material elements that present themselves in films directly stimulate the *material layers* of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire *physiological substance*" (Kracauer in Hansen 1987, p.458). For these theorists, viewing a film involves a close, intimate connection between the viewer and the screen.

These early phenomenological accounts of spectators' emotional and bodily resonances with films, resurface in film phenomenology, a strand of film theory that emerged in the late twentieth century. Film phenomenology is especially helpful in understanding the empathic entanglement of a viewer with a film. This theoretical approach to cinema focuses on the spectator's bodily response to what is seen onscreen and challenges the foundational principles of film studies, namely, the notion of the disembodied eye as well as an emphasis on narrative interpretation (see Branco 2012). Sobchack (1992, p. xvii), one of the leading proponents of film phenomenology, set out to develop "a radical semiotics and hermeneutics" that would describe "the origins of cinematic intelligibility and the signifying activity of embodied vision". In developing her theory on embodied spectatorship in the viewing of film, Sobchack (1992, p. 5, emphasis in original) argues that cinema involves

the perception of expression and the expression of *perception*. Indeed, it is this mutual capacity for and possession of experience through common structures of embodied existence, through similar modes of being in the world, that provide the *intersubjective* basis of objective cinematic communication.

I understand this argument to mean that while a film portrays the perceptions and expressions of characters in the world of the film viewers, in turn, understand the character's perceptions and expressions – or *feel with* them – because they are embodied beings living in the same world in which the film circulates and from which it draws its content. Thus, an empathic connection between film and viewer is established in the intersubjective realm of cinematic spectatorship.

In film phenomenology, this empathic connection has been described in emotional or somatic terms, focusing on 'cinematic empathy' or 'somatic empathy'. Cinematic empathy describes "an emotional process that occurs when audience members perceive, imagine, or hear about a film character's affective and mental state and, in so doing, vicariously experience a shared or congruent state" (Stadler 2019, p. 317). Through cinematic empathy, spectators might "feel with" or "feel into" a screen character or be able to understand their situation imaginatively. Smith argues that in film "our ability to empathise is extended across a wide range of types of person, and sustained and intensified by virtue of the artificial, 'designed' environment of fictional experience ..." (2011, p.111). In such fictional environments

the possibility of understanding 'from the inside' – that is, empathically imagining – human agents in social situations more or less radically different from our own emerges. We may come not only to see, but to feel, how an agent in each situation comes to feel. (Smith 2011, p. 111).

Apart from resonating with onscreen characters emotionally and cognitively, other theorists – such as Julian Hanich (2010, p. 83) argue that viewers can experience "somatic empathy" when they see imagery onscreen that arouses a physical response. In such instances, viewers experience a "*partial* parallelism between a character's and [their] own body's sensations, affects or motions" (Hanich 2010, p. 104, emphasis in original). This is especially the case when watching acts of violence; the pain experienced by the onscreen character might resonate within our bodies, leading us to "feel ourselves feeling" (Hanich 2010, p. 104).

The ability to feel with an onscreen character or persona in a cinema is also influenced by the particular characteristics and qualities of the movie theatre, which commands a particular ritual of spectatorship (Casetti 2011, p. 12). This ritual includes leaving home and then sitting in a dark theatre without being able to pause, rewind or fast-forward when a distraction arises. Watching a movie in a theatre is, therefore, an "event" that cannot be reduced to "something ordinary or habitual" (Casetti 2011, p. 12) and that commands the viewer's attention in ways that watching a news broadcast on a smartphone or computer does not. As Casetti (2020, p. 110) notes, in the movie theatre, "the immediate reality retreats and it is no longer present to us".

By contrast, the interfaces on which we usually view stories about refugees are vastly different to a cinema screen in a movie theatre. Anything we watch on television must compete with the everyday distractions found in the domestic sphere. Television must constantly remind its audience to return their attention to the screen. For instance, the opening tune of a TV programme, such as a news broadcast, signals the viewer that she must return if her attention has wandered. Like the digital interface, television does not allow us to retreat from reality, but keeps us in a constant state of distraction.

Thus, the nature of the cinematic interface is particularly effective in cultivating empathy in viewers, and it is these characteristics from which *Love Story* borrows. Of course, the cinematic interface has not only been a factory for the production of empathy, but it has also produced celebrity culture and the phenomenon of stardom. A brief discussion of the celebrity persona will assist in explaining why audiences fall so profoundly for Moore's and Baldwin's

performances rather than “the human agents” – the refugees – who are “radically different” from us (Smith 2011, p. 111).

THE CELEBRITY PERSONA

Actors such as Moore and Baldwin become stars when “their off-screen lifestyles and personalities equal or surpass acting ability in importance” (Gledhill 1991, p. xii). In other words, their perceived authenticity cements their star status and power over us (Dyer 1991, p. 137). Celebrity is a particularly interesting topic in persona studies, because, as Marshall et al. (2015, p. 289) argue, celebrities provide “some of the most visible, performative and pedagogic examples” of the construction of public identities. The study of the celebrity persona has become especially important owing to the wider circulation of mediated public identities in online social and cultural practices and on digital interfaces.

Moore and Baldwin are both well-established celebrity personas whose public identities are carefully constructed presentations of the self to a broad audience. Not only do we find their public personas widely circulating in advertisements, gossip columns, and television interviews, but, more importantly, we know that they live on in the real world, separate from their cinematic appearances. They have real lives and authentic selves, making people eager to believe (in) them (Dyer 1991, p. 137).

Breitz likely selected Moore and Baldwin to enact the asylum seekers’ stories owing to the currency they have acquired through the ways they have publicised, presented and enacted their public personas. Their believability is strengthened by filming them sitting on director’s chairs, as if they were being interviewed between filming on a set. People watching their performances in *Love Story* do not perceive them as acting a part; they seem to be talking about actual events in their lives. Since they are already in the business of “authenticating authenticity” (Dyer 1991, p. 137), it is not difficult to empathise with public personas as they recount ‘their’ tragic stories.

Another reason the audience may have been so willing to watch Moore and Baldwin while neglecting the real refugees portrayed in *Love Story*’s second room is the types of characters these actors have previously portrayed in films. Moore acts primarily in films that examine social issues, portraying “women at odds with their surroundings” (Pallardy 2023). For instance, she earned an Oscar for her sensitive portrayal of a linguistics professor with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease in *Still Alice* (2014). Baldwin is described as especially well-known for his portrayal of “roguish characters” (Tikkanen 2023). Although the roles for which Baldwin is famous range from comedy to drama, both actors have already acquired highly esteemed public personas in Hollywood and celebrity culture more generally.¹ For this reason, we are drawn to their performances in *Love Story* (2016), hungry for information about what we believe to be their private lives. After all, celebrities offer their audiences personal relationships (Gledhill 1991, p. xvi). For this reason, we readily empathise with them and the stories they perform owing to our affective, emotional and somatic entanglement with what we see on the cinematic interface.

By contrast, the public usually encounters the everyday personas of unknown refugees on screen, and the framing of such stories is motivated by political agendas or core themes already circulating in the media. These themes include a) the promotion of *fear* about the negative social and economic impact of immigrants within a particular society, b) the portrayal of immigrants as *pitiable* owing to maltreatment within intolerant societies, and c) the representation of Muslim immigrants as a *threat* to society based on post-9/11 media debates

(Lecheler et al. 2015, p. 813). Moreover, as I have already argued, watching such news broadcasts often takes place in an environment of distraction where the audience's absorption of the stories is often compromised. In short, in *Love Story* the impact of the celebrity persona on the public's empathic resonance is markedly deeper than that of the impact of the refugees.

EMPATHY AND THE FACE

It is not merely cinema and celebrity culture that *Love Story* draws from to make its statement, but more precisely, a specific cinematic strategy that has been used to great effect since the beginning of cinema, namely the close-up of the face. In the installation, Moore and Baldwin are portrayed on a single, large screen – similar in size to a cinema screen in a small movie theatre – while the refugees are all presented on much smaller LCD displays in the second room. All the individuals are portrayed from around the waistline and in front of a green screen. While the refugees are portrayed with no props other than clothes, jewellery and sunglasses, in some shots, technical apparatuses – presumably ones used on film sets – are visible behind Moore and Baldwin. Focus is, therefore, firmly placed on the participants' upper bodies, their hands, gestures, voices, and, most importantly, their faces. Spectators, therefore, come 'face-to-face', as it were, with the people displayed onscreen. In *Love Story*, the magnetic power of the face is very much part of the strategy Breitz employs to manipulate empathy, which bears further investigation.

Breitz (in Mania 2016, p. 51) describes Moore and Baldwin as "ventriloquist dummies" whom she used as attention bait. One cannot disagree that Moore and Baldwin are puppets in the hands of the artist, giving voice to other people's stories. However, if one considers the peculiar nature of 'the face' more carefully, this analogy turns out to be insufficient. For, as I will show, human faces *do* things that a puppet certainly cannot do, and this is one of the reasons audiences are so affected by the facial close-ups of Moore and Baldwin.

Emmanuel Levinas was fascinated with what faces do. His moral philosophy revolved around what he believed to be the extraordinary event of encountering the face of another person. In *Totality and infinity* (1979), he developed a phenomenology of intersubjective ethical responsibility, arguing that face-to-face encounters lead to the experience of an infinite social and ethical obligation to the other person. Owing to the *affective* dimension of this meeting, the encounter with the face of another is profoundly different from any other experience we might have. Unlike our experience of other objects which we can comprehend, the Other is never entirely knowable to us; they possess a transcendental quality. To be more precise, "the face is a living presence" that "speaks to me" and "thereby invites me to a relation" with it (Levinas 1979, p. 66, 198). To put it differently, "the face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (Levinas 1979, p. 201). Therefore, the face-to-face encounter with another person is a summons and a command that obliges us to respond ethically.

In a similar way, Daniel Black (2011, p. 1) argues that the face is "an instrument of communication" that "extends outside and predates language, rationality and consciousness" (Black 2011, p. 4). In other words, the face communicates non-verbally and non-linguistically long before language has entered the conversation. Communicating "affects and associations at a corporeal level" the face cannot be separated from the "bodily materiality" of communication (Black 2011, p. 3). Moreover, these affective expressions mostly occur involuntarily, except in the case of acting, perhaps. For instance, as Black (2011, p. 6) notes, it is impossible to fake a smile. Even though we can control our lips to form a smile, we cannot control the muscles at the edges of our eyes, which express the honesty of our smile. In this sense, while the ventriloquist's

dummy may possess eyes, a nose, a mouth, and ears, it is unable to express the inner world. In other words, it has no face.

The unique property of a human face, therefore, is its capacity to generate meaning, and to do so involuntarily. Renee van de Vall (2008, p. 50) observes that “not only do faces attract our attention more strongly than everything else does, but in our visual worlds there are no items that we see with so much alertness, discrimination and responsiveness.” Owing to their communicative intensity, faces are “centers of power, things that punctuate our world with little circles of meaning”, as James Elkins (1996, p. 169) puts it. A face possesses the power to transfix and, in some cases, petrify (Elkins 1996, p. 170).

If looking at the face of another person is an evocative encounter that potentially elicits a moral and ethical response, why do the faces of Moore and Baldwin in *Love Story* prompt such intense fascination while the faces of the refugees clearly do not captivate the audience in the same way? One reason may be the familiarity of the Hollywood personas in the lives of audiences in the West as I have already argued. The audience at the Venice Biennale, where I observed the work, mainly was – although not exclusively – white and Western. Thus, viewers of the installation in this environment might have more easily empathised with the familiar faces of the actors – who they have previously seen in the cinema – speaking fluent American English, than with the unknown refugees speaking with foreign accents. The ability to empathise with another person has been shown to increase if they are familiar to us or if we identify with them (See Avenanti et al. 2010; Bucchioni, et al. 2015). As Bucchioni et al. demonstrate, the “affective proximity” or “the degree of familiarity” between people “may influence the degree of empathy felt for another person” (2015, p. 8). In short, we feel with people who are more familiar to us than we do with strangers.

Another reason why Moore’s and Baldwin’s faces captivate audiences must surely be the immense size of the actors’ faces in relation to the audience. In 1921, Jean Epstein ([1921]1988, p. 20) expressed his admiration for the hypnotic impact of the cinematic close-up on spectators. More specifically, he argued that the enlargement of the face on the cinema screen “acts on one’s feelings, more to transform than to confirm them” (Epstein [1921]1988, p. 239). Thus, owing to its sheer size, the close-up of the human face in the movie theatre has both a mesmerising and transformative effect on the viewer. The close-up establishes an intense and intimate closeness between the viewer and the screen: “Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. [...] It is in me like a sacrament” (Epstein [1921]1988, p. 239). Writing a few decades later, Bela Balázs (1952, p. 61) argued that close-ups of the face present the subject’s “feelings, emotions, moods, intentions and thoughts” not only as visible but also as tangible. Although he did not use the term empathy, Balázs noted that the magnification of facial expressions and gestures onscreen can powerfully convey the character’s embodied subjectivity and elicit deep emotional and affective responses in spectators. Therefore, cinema produces “scenes of empathy” (Plantinga 1999, p. 230) in which the character’s inner emotional state is revealed using the expressive close-up.

The close-ups of the faces in the darkened first room in *Love Story* resemble viewing practices in a movie theatre, which, while establishing an intimate connection between spectator and screen also cuts us off from the world outside. In other words, our absorbed attention to the faces of Moore and Baldwin is carefully orchestrated through the strategic use of the large, single close-up in a darkened space. By contrast, while the faces of the refugees are also presented in close-up, the number and size of the smaller screens on which they are displayed as well as their unfamiliarity, simply cannot compete with the bewitching appeal of the celebrities’ faces.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have shown how the screen – whether cinematic or digital – and the face interface empathy. I have also shown how the cinema screen cultivates empathy while digital devices and TV screens tend to diminish it. As such, I have flirted with the question of whether our ‘affair’ with screens is a love story or a tragedy, as the debate is opened up by Breitz’s installation. Screens, not only via the content they mediate, but also due to their operative functioning, affect our capacity to empathise with others. Through close-ups of the human face, we readily feel familiar with actors such as Moore and Baldwin. Indeed, the use of the close-up of the face in early cinema demonstrated its potential for producing emotional resonance with onscreen characters. Moreover, owing to the production and performance of the celebrity’s public persona, we are more profoundly moved by Moore’s and Baldwin’s re-enactments of other people’s suffering than the stories told by the survivors themselves. This situation is a consequence of the plethora of screens in the contemporary screen-sphere, which not only offer endless opportunities to see and hear about the suffering of strangers, but also reward multitasking and distraction while doing so.

This, I argue, is the reason why people were less interested in listening to the refugees in *Love Story’s* second room. We imagine that our ability to connect with others via our digital devices and to keep up to date with world events enables a stronger involvement with other people, both near and distant. However, endless exposure to tragedy and despair presented via the screen reduces our capacity to understand others and feel with them. Constantly scrolling through news feeds leads to compassion fatigue, which also leads to empathy fatigue.

Turkle (2015, p. 302) believes that to increase our ability to communicate and feel with others, we need to ‘down tools’ and get away from our digital communication devices. She believes that empathy for others is cultivated via face-to-face conversations, where no digital devices are present. In such situations, we must slow down and really listen. However, in a digital world, a device-free existence is unthinkable. Moreover, it is doubtful that we would even hear about others’ traumas without our digital devices. Therefore, instead of discarding our devices “we may want to rewrite our social contract” with them (Turkle 2015, p. 312). This would entail being aware of how these interfaces affect us and would require taking the necessary steps to prevent compassion fatigue making us numb to the suffering of strangers. As *Love Story* demonstrates, art has a critical role to play in reminding audiences of their potentially tragic love affair with digital screens. In choreographing our empathic resonance with the characters in the installation, the audience potentially experienced shame upon realising that they were more interested in Moore’s and Baldwin’s performances than in the interviews with refugees. While the media shape our capacity for empathy by directing, controlling and perhaps even annihilating it, as conscious human beings it is our responsibility to see through these effects. We must avoid the path of mindless interaction with interfaces, be resilient and, as Turkle (2015, p. 340) recommends, “find ourselves”. For it is only once we have found ourselves, that we can find others.

END NOTES

¹ On October 2021, during the filming of *Rust* (forthcoming), Baldwin fired a gun loaded with a live round which led to the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins. At the time of writing, the court case was ongoing, with Baldwin facing two counts of manslaughter and possible imprisonment (<https://news.sky.com/story/alec-baldwin-asks-judge-to-dismiss-manslaughter-charges-over-rust->

shooting-13095024). It would be interesting to investigate how this tragic incident impacts audience's responses to the part he plays in *Love Story* (2016) in exhibitions of the work since then.

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