e-ISSN 2385-2720

**Venezia Arti** Nuova Serie 5 – Vol. 32 – Dicembre 2023

# The Visual Afterlife of *les gueules cassées*: Artistic Reception from the Interbellum to documenta 13

**Alexandra Timonina** Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Itali

**Abstract** The article discusses the representation of facial and bodily deformation as both a subject and an expressive means in diverse artistic media throughout the twentieth century until today. First, it wishes to provide a bibliographical overview of the recent research that delves into the problem from diverse methodologies. Second, it aims at tracing a timeline of how the imagery of 'broken faces', sometimes not directly related to the *gueules cassées*, yet persistent and recognisable, changed its use as a trope in the hands of modern and contemporary artists. Their works bear similarities in the dramatic accent on the deformation and decomposition of the body used to narrate collective trauma and a sense of confusion. Finally, the essay wishes to illustrate the complexity of this type of representation by contextualising some artworks within social and ethical contexts.

Keywords Body. Trauma. Facial Mutilations. Modernism.

**Summary** 1 The Tipping Point: Face Injuries of WWI. – 2 Broken Faces and Broken Bodies as a Subversive Tool in Dada and New Objectivity. – 3 The Subject, Deformation, and the Affect. – 4 Prosthetics and Disability in Twentieth-Century Visual Discourses. – 5 Contemporary Re-activation of the Trope in Curating and Installation Art.

The iconography of suffering has a long pedigree. The sufferings most often deemed worthy of representation are those understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human. [...] It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked. [...] There was also the repertoire of hard-to-look-at cruelties from classical antiquity – the pagan myths, even more than the Christian stories, offer some thing for every taste. No moral charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: Can you look at this? Susan Sontag [2003] 2013, 36-7

Fiction presents more opportunities for creating uncanny sensations than are possible in real life. Sigmund Freud [1919] 1959, 406

## 1 The Tipping Point: Face Injuries of WWI

The impact of WWI on visual culture in Europe is impossible to underestimate, and the ways the visualization of the disfigured bodies of its participants reshaped how victimhood, militarism, and collective trauma have been addressed in the art through the years that followed were, to a different extent, explored by scholars. However, the issues of disability and affect have been addressed only occasionally until the 2000s. WWI was not only the war of the trenches but also the war of the metal combat helmet, first widely introduced in 1915. Henceforth, previously fatal injuries became the source of grave mutilation for soldiers' faces. The servicemen suffering from such injuries soon came to be called *les gueules cassées* ('broken faces' or 'broken mugs'). This new type of disfiguration was



Peer review Submitted 2023-08-31 Accepted 2023-10-31

Published 2023-12-20 **Open access** © 2023 Timonina | 🞯 🕐 4.0



Citation Timonina, A. (2023). "The Visual Afterlife of *les gueules cassées*: Artistic Reception from the Interbellum to documenta 13". *Venezia Arti*, 32, 91-104.

captured not only by emerging plastic surgeons and those doctors and artists who designed covers and masks for retired servicemen, but also by modernist painters. Several researchers covered the circumstances in which *les gueules cassées* imagery emerged and what impact it had on the art between the World Wars. Among these, the work of Marjorie Gehrhardt (2015) deserves particular appreciation. It should be said that this topic has also persisted and has experienced a new surge in attention in contemporary art and curating. However, this latter tendency has not yet been explored systematically and in a way that would combine both art-historical and curatorial perspectives.

Facial deformations immediately provoked the interest of artists in the 1910s, not least because the face has been of vital importance in visual culture since before the Renaissance and because of the way beauty was linked to symmetry.<sup>1</sup> The injuries of *les gueules cassées* represented an outstanding challenge to those canons and set the artists before a dilemma about what the images of the wounded can be like and what messages they should carry over. Before WWI, deformed faces were not a common image in art; even though deformation was a typical feature of caricature, it was normally part of the grotesque expressivity.

Facelessness as a visual phenomenon exploded with WWI, not due to its novelty, but to its scope. There were thousands of soldiers in France, Germany and Great Britain who came back from the war with wounds, including those causing serious distress in everyday life. Facial injuries represented a significant share among the mutilations, and were arguably the most problematic, due to the alienation wounded in the face lived through, further reinforced by the lack of sensitivity in society.

The society's tendency to stigmatize bodily, let alone facial, disfiguration has long been addressed in fiction, but visual arts were less sensible to the topic up until WWI. The reasons lie in the specificity of the aesthetic paradigm in the Western European tradition that dominated throughout the nineteenth century, favouring idealized bodies while reserving only a limited space for more critical explorations. The images of les queules cassées questioned the perception and interpersonal relations habits of the observer<sup>2</sup> and were arguably what drew several artists to the subject.<sup>3</sup> The visual repercussions of les queules cassées touch upon a myriad of problems, ranging from trauma to identity and memory, from affect to repair. Most artistic interpretations that were concerned with war injuries from the 1920s onward contain a hidden agenda of care in them because the very gesture of rendering visible the marginalized and neglected bodies advocates for their inclusion and possibly protection. The same attitude, in a different, more direct way, was shared by the doctors and artists who designed the masks for the wounded. There were many pioneering surgeons and artists-sculptors who came to the assistance of the wounded, paving the way for experiments in the field of facial reconstruction. Anna Coleman Ladd was, for instance, an American sculptor and Red Cross volunteer whose efforts in producing the masks for the wounded functioning as prostheses bridged art and innovation in medical care. Admittedly, the work of doctors and sculptors with these people marked the early history of plastic surgery.

In many cases, photography served as a tool for keeping track of the process of reconstruction or prosthetic repair. Even though these shots were made for the sake of dry assertion of patients' condition and were "supposed not to evoke but to show", to use the differentiation applied by Susan Sontag in her analysis of photography as a documentary means,<sup>4</sup> they still were charged with a whole set of emotive and affective triggers alongside the one related to social responsibility. Interestingly, as it can be seen in archival documentation, some of the captions to these shots included the word 'repair', and even specific organs, like eyes, were described as 'restored' [fig. 1].<sup>5</sup> Although the elements that formed the masks were mostly removable, the idea of fixing, recovery and care was one of the core assumptions that guided these practitioners. The governments generously supported prosthetic medicine, and the recovery

<sup>1</sup> Gehrhardt 2015, 178.

<sup>2</sup> Gehrhardt 2015, 178; 2013, 269-70.

**<sup>3</sup>** Besides canonical modernists discussed below, such as Otto Dix, there were other graphic artists who produced works depicting the mutilated faces of soldiers. The portraits were often commissioned by medical institutions. Not many of the draughtsmen are identifiable but the work of Raphaël Frida and Henry Tonks can be mentioned in this regard. The latter was a doctor prior to his considerably successful artistic career. See Gehrhardt 2013, 246-51.

**<sup>4</sup>** Sontag [2003] 2013, 42. She pointed out the importance of photographic dimension of war and suffering. She discussed how the meanings of the photographs were perceived in both contemporaneous and historical perspective as virtually an equivalent of truth and/or reality. Sontag came close to suggesting this as an epistemological fallacy, as famously and not unambiguously argued in her analysis of the production of Roger Fenton's reportage shot *Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855), that he made during the Crimean War.

<sup>5</sup> See Horace W. Nicholls' photographs of the work by sculptor Francis Derwent Wood in Biernoff (2011) and Gehrhardt (2013, 227-9).

of the wounded was publicized on a large scale through photography, exhibitions, and mass media, revealing bold ideological aspects of these enterprises that sought a reconciliation but at the same time overshadowed the harsh conditions of the injured.<sup>6</sup>

From another standpoint, the facial covers produced by the sculptors with nothing but good intentions risked denying their human traits even more than the disfiguration itself.<sup>7</sup> González-Ruibal suggested that while the very figure of a soldier was a 'human hybrid' as such, united with the ammunition or devices of war that served him (a tank, a plane, or simply the trenches), it was the impact of the mutilation and ultimately prostheses which had the most dehumanizing and hybridizing effect on the bodies: "As the cyborgs of science fiction, the artificial additions prevented the wounded to convey emotions".<sup>8</sup>

#### 2 Broken Faces and Broken Bodies as a Subversive Tool in Dada and New Objectivity

By the early twentieth century, there was a lot of experimental art that had already challenged the integrity of the face on canvas, from Picasso to German expressionists and Dada collage art. In Dada, the metaphorical decomposition of the body is largely linked with the mechanicity as an outcome of the modern age and industrialization. At the same time the idea of mechanization was used by the Dadaists to challenge the notion of authorship in high art.<sup>9</sup> Many of them transformed the bodies in their art into monstrous hybrids. Both the industrial condition and the traumatic experiences of war were essential to the emergence of this expressive means. In the work of George Grosz, for example, the body frequently appears as a machine out of function. For Dada, the decomposing attitude towards the body hid the idea of it as a fragmented being. It can be at once seen as a challenge to the classical idea, as a political reaction to the post-war condition and as the urgency for repair and healing, even though neither of them singularly nor all combined are exhaustive in addressing the question of how the human appeared in this movement.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Marcel Duchamp's bachelor machines and Francis Picabia's mechanical aesthetic of that same era can be understood as guests for alternative masculinity amid a militarized reality. In light of this, the attention to physicality, body and appearance which largely characterized the work of Otto Dix, should also be linked to the way he was implicitly concerned with the issue of masculinity, as experienced in the new cultural context of Weimar Germany.<sup>11</sup> His *oeuvre* is arguably the most frequent

illustration in the commentary on the turmoil that les gueules cassées spread in the arts. The images of disabled veterans appear in numerous painterly and graphic works of Dix, such as War Cripples (1920), Prague Street (1920), The Match Seller (1920), the triptychs The War (1929-32)<sup>12</sup> and Metropolis (1927-28), and his most ambitious and now lost painting The Trench (1920-23), that was featured in the infamous Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich in 1937.

Besides documenting the direct experience of facial mutilations in the battleground, Dix insisted on the repercussions these traumas had for the wounded within Weimar society. Moreover, he turned to the problem of care and assistance, both by criticizing the abandonment and discrimination of the veterans and by addressing the techniques of facial reconstructions, as in Transplantation (1924) [fig. 2], from The War series. The scene is evidently set in a hospital and is much less emotional than other of his representations of wounded in the face. The framing of this graphic piece echoes that of the photographs of les queules cassées taken as medical documentation. The work was evidently realized based on a headshot of a patient.<sup>13</sup> The centre of the composition is the wound of the sitter itself which, although terrifying to the viewer, still enables him to recognize the person and therefore empathize with the latter. The work is deprived of the acute sense of ridicule that many of his other pieces exploring this subject share, for instance, in the extant etching *War Cripples* (the painterly version of which was lost during the campaign against the Degenerate

- 8 Gonzalez-Ruibal 2018, 176.
- 9 Biro 2022.
- 10 Adamowicz 2019, 1-7.
- **11** Funkenstein 2005.
- **12** For a recent commentary on this artwork see the analysis by Bayer 2020.
- 13 Mentioned by Gehrhardt (2013, 261) and in a blog by Murray (2023, 99).

<sup>6</sup> Reznick 2004.

<sup>7</sup> González-Ruibal 2022, 212.



Figure 1 Captain Francis Derwent Wood with a patient, 3rd London General Hospital. 1910s. Photograph. Imperial War Museum Collections. © IWM Q 30456

Art) and Skat Players (1920). In the former, the image conveys the idea that the "machinery of war produced these human wrecks, but Dix's depiction of their grotesque prostheses shows that peacetime technology is not able to put these men back together again".<sup>14</sup> Dix himself received several injuries during his service. His war diary encompasses more than six hundred drawings that chronicle the routine in the trenches, along with written testimonies.<sup>15</sup> His desire to see the war with his own eyes was irresistible and disturbingly common among his peers. Some images from that experience were transformed by the artist into fifty etchings under the unvarnished title The War (1924). This project was considerably allusive to Francisco Goya's The Disasters of War (1810-20). The series addresses the military environment and violence on a very individual level. In all his production that was concerned with the war and its aftermath, the destruction, rather than any other

agenda, becomes the key motif that Dix keeps returning to throughout the 1920s. For example, the folio Wounded Man (Autumn 1916, Bapaume) from The War portfolio shows the anguish of a soldier whose body and face are so badly injured that he is almost unrecognizable, either because of the damage to his face or because of the agonizing scream that comes through the hole, where his mouth used to be. In his Skat Players "the war is portrayed as a savage farce".<sup>16</sup> All three of the players suffer from severe facial mutilations and are covered in prosthetic devices. The wounded soldiers are presented as mechanized bodies swiftly playing cards with their prostheses. Dix uses a grotesque repertoire of means, which was typical for other artists like Grosz as well, but in Skat Players, he pushes it even more towards comicality<sup>17</sup> by making the choreography of artificial limbs clumsy yet efficient enough to allow his sitters to play. In this painting, all the elements together form a vortex

**<sup>14</sup>** Poore 2007, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Karcher 1987, 16.

**<sup>16</sup>** Karcher 1987, 33.

<sup>17</sup> On the jaw of the player sitting to the left a sarcastic sticker that reads "Lower jaw: prosthesis trademark Dix: 'Only authentic if featuring the picture of the inventor'" and is accompanied by the photograph in question (as cited in Gehrhardt 2015, 225).

of layers and colors, as if inviting the viewer to decipher the position of their limbs all over the canvas while observing its minor details, such as metal foil, playing cards and newspaper layouts glued to its surface.

Dorothy Price, in contrast to other scholars analyzing Dix's Skat Players as a work inspired by a real scene that he witnessed in the backroom of a Dresden café, calls for an even more political reading of this painting, discussing how it dealt with the issue of disability and often instrumentalized it.<sup>18</sup> Interpreting the work as Dix's critique of the nationalistic and militarized culture, with its constructs of heroic patriotism enduring amid post-war capitalism, can provide a logical explanation for the sarcasm, cruelty, and exaggeration with which he depicted wounded veterans.<sup>19</sup> In Skat Players, as well as in the War Cripples drypoint, they appear as monstrous puppets. Besides limb-injured figures in this image, there also is a soldier with a nervous tic that makes his body and face shiver (the movement is stressed by Dix in a drizzling futuristic effect of the simultaneous depiction of a sequence of instances, when parts of his body are trembling in the space), which was another form of trauma experienced by the servicemen. Dix's pitifulness functions as a counteract to the passiveness of the State that deprived the injured of prominence in the social sphere. The exclusion in his art is also represented through the scenes that might be deciphered by the viewer as the reduced opportunities of his characters in the choice of a partner due to their disabilities, as can be seen in Prostitute and Disabled Veteran (1923). Throughout his career, Dix mixed up violence and ugliness, often creating profoundly unconventional combinations, such as in his way of mixing up erotic subjects with the issues of poverty and disabilities.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, the monstrous presence of Dix's *Skat Players* (1920) or in works such as *Transplantation*, were anti-militarist gestures that used the grotesque bodies to delineate the narrative of

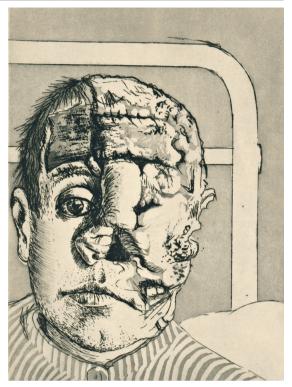


Figure 2 Otto Dix, *Transplantation*. From the portfolio *The War*. 1924. Etching, aquatint, and drypoint. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. © Scala, Firenze/bpk, Bildagentur für Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte, Berlin

rejection, isolation and dehumanization being the result of the conflict. The latter reshaped the expressive research of the entire cohort of artists, but only a few of them took up the images of facial injuries, one of the most challenging cultural tropes of the era, transforming them into a subversive tool. The engagement of visual artists with this topic was in no small part supported by the standards expecting them to portray reality in a critical way, and possibly, to be an agent of change. These were the key factors that made this imagery live beyond the immediate artistic response to it in the 1920s.

**18** Price 2019, 752-3.

20 See Karcher 1984.

**<sup>19</sup>** Finemann 1999, 94.

#### 3 The Subject, Deformation, and the Affect

Facial injuries might be regarded as more distressful because they are more prone to make individuals struggle with recognizing themselves as human beings. Admittedly, most of the photographs of les queules cassées were made in medical contexts with specific purposes, as the victims of such traumas might have sure been extremely hesitant to have their pictures taken in a less formal environment. There is a large space for the discussion of the affective dimension of the experiences related to facial mutilations, as evidenced by Jirsa.<sup>21</sup> These deformations of WWI, according to him, being at the edge of representation, provoke the affective mechanisms bringing to the emergence of new 'disturbances' that inevitably start to pervade the aesthetic field.<sup>22</sup> In some realms of post-WWI life, these experiences seemed to have been silenced, and the body acquired a new role in the cultural memory of WWI that was more about forgetting or idealizing. The ways it occurred through both art and film are sufficiently explored.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the theory of affect might offer a deep understanding of how the face, both in daily communication and art, is a meeting point of different kinds of visibility, while

the formless comes about as an event of disrupted representation that triggers such affects as shock, fascination, confusion, horror, and uncanny which, in turn, intrude upon, shatter, remake, transform, and reinvent the hitherto recognizable forms.<sup>24</sup>

Socially and culturally, the face represents one of the central elements of identity. Hence, the role of the face embedded linguistically in idioms, such as 'to lose face', 'to save face' or simply 'to face up', which is also broadly present in different languages. The face is a primary channel for communication and the expression of emotions. The inner conflict triggered by the face traumas concerns both the wounded and the observer. Intertwining the act of seeing and that of being visible, the wounds of these kinds challenge "both the gaze and the anthropological meaning of face"<sup>25</sup> and are, therefore, disrupting on the level of identity.

The way the body was challenged in the early twentieth-century avant-garde, in response to

the global military conflict, offered the subsequent generations of artists a mediation of that experience and an example of how to confront the universal traumatic events. A visual echo of les queules cassées extended upon the artists coming of age during and after WWII, and some of them share similarities in the dramatic accent on the deformation and decomposition of the body. The provocative performances of Günter Brus saw him using his own body as canvas and sometimes as an instrument of violent secular exorcism. Brus' actions, such as Vienna Walk (1965), often staged in the public space, balanced between self-mutilation and celebration of individual freedom. Meanwhile in Francis Bacon's work, deformation often appears as a metaphor for the impermanence of existence, taking the form of blurry portraits formally recalling the wounded faces of World Wars combatants, albeit not showing any actual physical injuries. He translated the appearances of his sitters into twisted, almost phantom presences, because he deemed it to be the only way he could really 'record' their 'appearance' and reveal their personalities in the constant transition. The artist wondered why this approach might have been misunderstood by his models and the public: "people believe - simple people at least - that the distortions of them are an injury to them".<sup>26</sup>

Deformation admittedly suggests his effort to flee the mimetic framework and challenge the gaze of his viewers together with their presumptions about identity.

Whether the distortions which I think sometimes bring the image over more violently are damage is a very questionable idea. I don't think it is damage. You may say it's damaging if you take it on the level of illustration. But not if you take it on the level of what I think of as art. One brings the sensation and the feeling of life over the only way one can. I don't say it's a good way, but one brings it over at the most acute point one can.<sup>27</sup>

The viewer of his work is confronted with the strength of his expressive choices and the physicality of the faces and bodies he depicts, making

- 23 See, for example, Carden-Coyne 2009, 82-93.
- 24 Jirsa 2022, 35.
- 25 Jirsa 2022, 26.
- 26 Bacon in Sylvester 1975, 40-1.
- **27** Bacon in Sylvester 1975, 43.

**<sup>21</sup>** Jirsa 2019; 2022, 23-42.

<sup>22</sup> Jirsa 2022, 25.

this contact nearly violent.<sup>28</sup> Bacon was also fascinated by real forms of disability, as seen in his 1975 work *Portrait of a Dwarf*. Of utter importance is the fact that deformed faces in his works are often unveiled as self-portraits, making them even stronger as a potential symbol of interior conflict, suffering and a way of surviving a collective trauma. Bacon himself was rather elusive in attributing those immediate connotations to his paintings. However, it is evident that his aim was to evoke ambiguity and anguish at once. In this sense, the mechanisms he resorts to are close to those that provoked the unrest of the public confronted with the wounds of *les gueules cassées* after WWI.

# 4 Prosthetics and Disability in Twentieth-Century Visual Discourses

The way disability is narrated and visualized in literature, art, film, and media culture overall is a complex issue, presently targeted by scholars of many disciplines. For the last decades, there has been growing attention to the problematic of the category of 'disabled', its arbitrary nature and its tight relation to the consensus about the norms surrounding the body, especially when used outside of strictly medical circumstances. The discussion balances on the edge between medical research and the humanities, and the perspectives deserving attention range from 'visibility' to human rights.<sup>29</sup> Many scholars, in fact, trace the origins of the debate about art and disability to les queules cassées. However, in the Interbellum period, despite the intensity of the phenomenon discussed above, the number of artists who responded to what occured was comparatively modest. Given its scale and its affective and emotional implications, it is indeed staggering how superficial the reaction in European artistic modernism was. The body mostly continued to be narrated and represented in figurative media as an integral whole and unchallenged entity. Neither in mainstream art, which paradoxically used a particularly conventional aesthetic when asserting its commemorative functions in relation to the war, nor in the avant-garde movements was there a full-scale debate addressing the decomposition of the body experienced by the WWI generation, while the artists who articulated a critical statement did so with a striking deal. The aesthetic of a deformed or fractured body, as it is widely recognized, persisted in Surrealism, appearing in the work of Hans Bellmer and André Masson, among others, but in

any case, as Philippe Dagen has claimed, the intensity of the reaction to these traumas and its political memory were notably less intense in visual arts than in literature. Overall, in the visual discourse, the rapidity of 'forgetting', which is explicit in the wave of aesthetic conservatism that was at the roots of the canons of war monuments as well as of the agenda of the modernist movement of *rappel à l'ordre*, represents an intriguing cultural phenomenon, which was highlighted by several scholars.<sup>30</sup>

Within the work of the artists active in the Russian Empire, and later in the Soviet cultural space, the issues of the cultural transformation experienced by the body throughout those years, let alone body injuries of the veterans and even more specifically facial mutilations, have a strikingly scant presence.<sup>31</sup> The reasons for this absence, disproportionate to the social and political repercussions of the conflict, revolutions and civil war, are yet to be researched. One of the few artworks showing the wounded in that context is Iurii Pimenov's The Invalids of War (1926) [fig. 3]. The deformed bodies and horrifyingly altered expressions of the two characters move towards the viewer from the centre of the canvas as a single zombie-shaped mechanized monster. An interesting detail in this work is how the devastated architecture and landscape behind the figures echo their disfigured bodies.<sup>32</sup> The figure of a disabled person remained extremely problematic and marginalized throughout the entire Soviet cultural history. The maimed veteran is virtually absent in the art of Socialist Realism, although having a place in the literary field, despite mostly serving

**<sup>28</sup>** Van Alphen 2019, 167.

**<sup>29</sup>** See among others Davis 2017.

**<sup>30</sup>** Dagen 1996; Adamowicz 2019, 48; Carden-Coyne 2009, 110-59.

**<sup>31</sup>** While an illustrious graphic project of the avant-garde artist Natalia Goncharova *Mystical Images of War* (1915) addresses the turmoil of WWI, decomposed bodies only appear in these prints in the form of skeletons as the artist avoids excessive subversion or any skepticism in the way she addresses violence. Throughout the 1910s the real wounded body appeared sporadically in the art with the propaganda function, such as a poster by Leonid Pasternak, *Help the War Victims* (1914), or Aleksandr Moravov's *Donate for a Home for Maimed Warriors* (1916), produced for a charity under the aegis of the Red Cross, but never pushed the limits of a general patriotic narrative.

<sup>32</sup> Degot' 2000, 111.

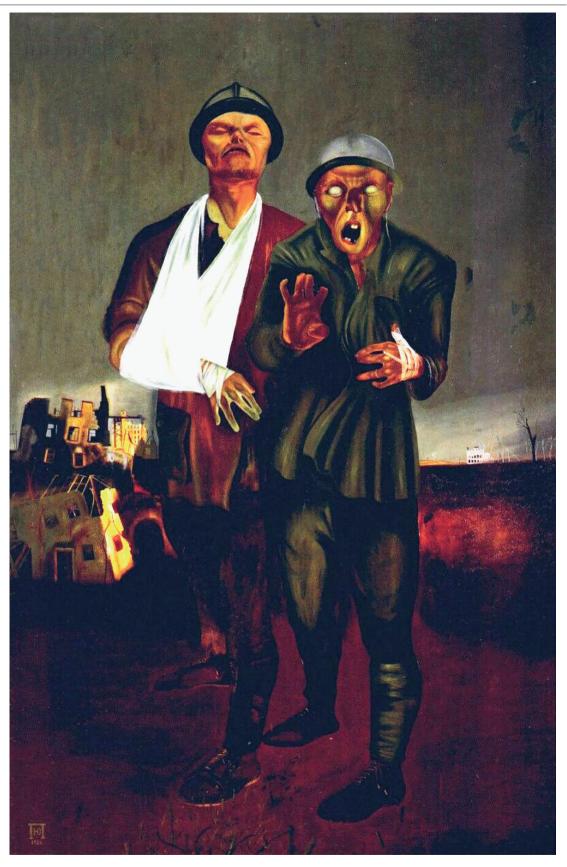


Figure 3 Iurii Pimenov, The Invalids of War. 1926. Oil on canvas. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg, ZhB-994

as an obstacle a Soviet hero overcomes in the name of the State.<sup>33</sup> Following WWII, the exclusion of the wounded outside of this cliché is, nonetheless, evident in the lack of support of the disabled soldiers, which also revealed a gap between the post-war propaganda and the implementation of the welfare policies by the Soviet State.<sup>34</sup>

Another echo of les queules cassées imagery was the way the cultural trope of the 'disabled villain', widely spread in literature and early film, particularly present in German Expressionism and American horrors of the 1930s, was destabilized and at once alimented by it. The expressive repertoire evoking a villain as a body with deformed or exaggerated features in twentieth-century visual arts can also be tracked in the masterpieces, such as the silent film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) by Robert Wiene (1873-1938), starring Conrad Veidt (1893-1943). Veidt also made an iconic performance in the American production The Man Who Laughs by Paul Leni (1928) [fig. 4]. The film based on the eponymous novel (1869) by Victor Hugo, featured Veidt as Gwynplaine and is particularly remarkable for his make-up conveying an eerie smile, the result of childhood mutilation. Though the film was not a horror, Veidt's character is well-known to be

a precursor of Joker from the Batman comics and films.<sup>35</sup> The grotesque appearance of Gwynplaine makes him repulsive, but Hugo's masterplan of the novel reverses the regular associations between the image and the meaning, making the ugly appear as good and not evil and thus radically challenging his readers' presumptions.<sup>36</sup>

Literature and film of the twentieth century abounds with examples of disabled villains, ranging from Nosferatu to Dr. No in James Bond's inaugural film to Voldemort in the Harry Potter franchise. These characters are often composed of a set of discriminatory stereotypes, making the motif itself admittedly abusive. The aggression that is attributed to such characters is often left without explanation within the storyline or is simply presented as a desire for revenge, making the combination of physical disfiguration and malice seem immanent and natural. Moreover, here social exclusion also appears as an essential motif and a result of the two features of the character. As it happens when the villain in the story is a foreigner, the scheme with visible disabilities addresses the most banal instincts of the viewer or reader: a non-recognition pattern, the refusal of the Other with ugly features.

**33** McCallum 2015, 260-1.

**35** Cashill 2019.

**36** Girard 1965, 50.

**<sup>34</sup>** Fieseler 2005. The sensibility towards the war veterans back in the late 1910s and 1920s in Russian society was low as recently discussed by Sumpf 2022.



**Figure 4** Paul Leni, *The Man Who Laughs*, 1928, silent film. Universal Pictures. Still

### 5 Contemporary Re-activation of the Trope in Curating and Installation Art

Recently, there has been a notable rise of interest in the heritage of les queules cassées and other historical imageries of modernity relatable to collective traumas, from both curators and artists. One of the exhibition projects that reactivated the subject was les queules cassées: Scars from the Great War in Contemporary Art held at Kunsthalle Mainz in 2014, co-curated by Markus Schinwald who represented Austria at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Schinwald was also one of the contributing artists - his compositions having an appearance of nineteenth-century upper-middle class portraiture were 'corrected' or 'repaired' with prostheses, scars, metal hinges and other elements suggesting the loss of facial and possible individual integrity. The Mainz exhibition commemorated the centenary of the beginning of WWI through a selection of contemporary practices interrogating the relation between body and collective memory. Many artists in this show turn significantly to arterial and historical research nonetheless freely interpreting the past and using it as a tool for addressing present-day issues. As to the curatorial speculation within this project, it attempted to provide contemporary production with a genealogy tracing back to the modernist era, while choosing a strong visual motif of *les gueules cassées* as a signifier for the sense of brokenness: the body with the marks as a metaphor of identity crisis. In the case of deformed facial features, the motif doubtlessly persisted in modern art but the re-activation of *les gueules cassées* imagery is more related to the same aspects that fascinated the artists in the 1920s, namely its transgressive potential, the ability to shock and challenge the viewer.

It appears, for example, in the installations of French-Algerian artist Kader Attia and Israeli artist Yael Bartana, and their approaches, while formally different, feature some common dynamics.<sup>37</sup> The video installation *Entartete Kunst Lebt* (Degenerate Art Lives), realized by Bartana in 2010, is another example where *les gueules cassées* were openly used by an artist as a motif acquiring new connotations. In this animation featuring an army of wounded, with countless prostheses instead of limbs, dressed in ripped military

**<sup>37</sup>** Both of their practices have been recently commented by Marno (2017; 2020; 2022) in relation to the early twentieth-century sources the two artists use in their work.

uniforms, Bartana dwelled on the imagery of Otto Dix's works,<sup>38</sup> aiming at translating some mockery effect with the awkwardness of their movements. The poetics of her film was examined by Marno, who emphasized how by appropriating the figures of the disabled servicemen in Dix's work, Bartana conveys a radically new meaning, making these broken bodies relate to contemporary Israeli history.<sup>39</sup> The parading invalids in the War Cripples seem to be at once a dance macabre and mechanic dolls performance, and this effect, already present in the original image, was replicated and reinforced by Bartana. Bartana's invalids march in an abstract space,<sup>40</sup> but even if they appear eternal, they do not exist outside of history. The story of Dix's lost painting enters to make part of Bartana's work: the army of walking dead or half-dead parade as a memory of a destroyed and suppressed voice, that criticized the ardent turn-of-the-century militarism. Hers is a work that wishes to produce a universal caution sign against human indole to resort to violence.

Attia incorporated the subject in his 2012 work The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures. He replicated the effects and the discursive gualities of the images of the WWI injured servicemen, by arranging them in a monotonous slideshow. This decision echoed the mechanisms put in action by the artists of the 1920s, by making them a critical and at once silent statement on the atrocities of armed conflicts and their impact on individuals and their bodies. However, in comparison with the work of Bartana, he opts for documentary, photographic material to enact the impression that those images speak for themselves. Yet, through this deliberative effect, the wounded in Attia's work become a visual element encompassing coloniality and the idea of healing. This

installation was presented in 2012 at *documenta* 13, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, and was his breakthrough. Attia works with the idea of displacement, critically looking at the presumed link between history and its material presence in the objects, and has long been interested in the subject of recovery.

Concurrently, there are numerous artists who work with prostheses, sometimes calling attention to the need for major sensibility regarding disabilities and sometimes building up on the legacy of Donna Haraway's ideas about the body. Moreover, there is a growing presence of reflections about the way the human body relates to technology or bacteria and how even digital realities challenge the presumed integrity of the human being on the ontological level in artistic practice alongside the broader philosophical debate on the post-human condition. Due to the possibility of formal juxtapositions of early twentieth-century art machine aesthetic and post-modern cyborgs, les queules cassées and contemporary prosthetic bodies, being united by the understanding of the body as an entity that can be extended,<sup>41</sup> have lately been brought together in several large-scale exhibition projects. Indeed, the 2022 edition of the Venice Biennale curated by Cecilia Alemani offered, among others, a thematic selection of artworks ranging from Constructivist costume design to Dada sculpture and Thomas Edison talking dolls, grouped together under the subtitle The Seduction of the Cyborg, a reference to an eponymous 1994 video art piece by American digital art pioneer Lynn Hershman Leeson. Remarkably, the curator's sensibility, which made her associate the photographs of Coleman Ladd's masks for les queules cassées and the cyborg imagery, was reminiscent of the way wounded bodies appeared in Dix's mechanical carnival of Skat Players.

38 The painting version of War Cripples was destroyed by the Nazis, hence the title of Bartana's installation.

- 39 Marno 2017, 119.
- 40 Marno 2017, 26.
- 41 Feuvre 2016.

## Bibliography

- Ackerman, A. (2016). "Redonner visage aux gueules cassées. Sculpture et chirurgie plastique pendant et après la Première Guerre mondiale". *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne/Canadian Art Review*, 41(1), 5-21. https://doi.org/10.7202/1037548ar.
- Adamowicz, E. (2019). *Dada Bodies: Between Battlefield* and Fairground. Manchester.
- Aitken, I. (2001). European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction. Edinburgh.
- Bayer, M. (2020). "Der Krieg: Otto Dix's War Triptych, Memory, and the Perception of the First World War". Winter, J.M. et al. (eds), *Portraits of Remembrance: Painting, Memory, and the First World War*, Tuscaloosa.
- Biernoff, S. (2011). "The Rhetoric of Disfigurement in First World War Britain". Social History of Medicine, 24(3), 666-85. https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkq095.
- Biro, M. (2022). "The Cyborg as Producer". Alemani, C. et al. (eds), *Biennale Arte 2022: The Milk of Dreams* = *Exhibition catalogue* (Venice, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April-27 November 2022). Venice, 500-5.
- Broderick, M.; Traverso, A. (eds) (2010). *Trauma, Media, Art: New Perspectives*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne.
- Cachia, A. (2017). "Disabling Surrealism. Reconstituting Surrealist Tropes in Contemporary Art". Millett-Gallant, Howie 2017, 132-54.
- Carden-Coyne, A. (2009). *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism Modernism and the First World War*. Oxford.
- Cashill, R. (2019). "Review of *The Man Who Laughs*, by C. Laemmle, P. Leni, & J.G. Alexander". *Cinéaste*, 44(4), 66-7.
- Cork, R. (1994). A Bitter Truth: Avant-Garde Art and the Great War. New Haven.
- Dagen, D. (1996). Le silence des peintres. Les artistes face à la Grande Guerre. Paris.
- Davis, L.J. (2017). "The Ghettoization of Disability: Paradoxes of Visibility and Invisibility in Cinema". Waldschmidt, A.; Berressem, H.; Ingwersen, M. (eds), Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies. Bielefeld, 39-50. https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839425336-005.
- Degot', E. (2000). Russkoe iskusstvo XX veka. Moskva.
- Derlon, B.; Jeudy-Ballini, M. (2015). "Appropriations et réparations dans l'œuvre de Kader Attia". *Cahiers d'anthropologie sociale*, 12(2), 77-94.
- Eco, U. (2007). Storia della bruttezza. Milano.
- Feo, K. (2007). "Invisibility: Memory, Masks and Masculinities in the Great War". *Journal of Design History*, 20(1), 17-27. https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epl039.
- Feuvre, L. (2016). "Extending Bodies". Tate Etc, 36. https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/ issue-36-spring-2016/extending-bodies.
- Fieseler, B. (2005). "The Bitter Legacy of the 'Great Patriotic War': Red Army Disabled Soldiers under Late Stalinism". Furst, J. (ed.), *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention*. London; New York, 46-61.
- Finemann, M. (1999). "Ecce Homo Prostheticus". New German Critique, 76, Special Issue, Weimar Visual Culture, 93-6. https://doi.org/10.2307/488659.
- Fischer, L.-P. et al. (eds). "Les gueules cassées représentées par de grands peintres (O. Dix – G. Grosz – R.

Freida): la défiguration en histoire de l'art".*Histoire des Sciences Médicales*, 41(4), 337-46.

- Freud, S. [1919] (1959). "The Uncanny". *Sigmund Freud. Collected Papers*. Authorized Translation Under the Supervision of J. Riviere. New York.
- Funkenstein, S.L. (2005). "A Man's Place in a Woman's World: Otto Dix, Social Dancing, and Constructions of Masculinity in Weimar Germany". Women in German Yearbook, 21, 163-91. https://doi. org/10.1353/wgy.2005.0003.
- Gehrhardt, M. (ed.) (2015). The Men with Broken Faces: "Gueules Cassées" of the First World War. Bern.
- Gehrhardt, M.I.S. (2013). The Destiny and Representations of Facially Disfigured Soldiers During the First World War and the Interwar Period in France, Germany and Great Britain [PhD Dissertation]. Exeter.
- Girard, R. (1965). "Monstres et demi-dieux dans l'oeuvre de Hugo". *Symposium*, 19(1), 50-7. https://doi.or g/10.1080/00397709.1965.10732844.
- Gonzalez-Ruibal, A. (2018). An Archaeology of the Contemporary Era. London.
- González-Ruibal, A. (2022). "Object Worlds". Wilkie, L.A.; Chenoweth, J.M. (eds), *A Cultural History of Objects in the Modern Age*. Vol 6. London, 203-23. https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/31477/ les-gueules-casses-scars-of-the-greatwar-in-contemporary-art/.
- Hutchison, M.; Trout, S.; Winter, J.M. (2020). Portraits of Remembrance: Painting Memory and the First World War. Tuscaloosa.
- Jirsa, T. (2015). "Facing the Faceless: The Erased Face as a Figure of Aesthetic and Historical Experience". *Czech and Slovak Journal of Humanities*, 5(1), 104-19.
- Jirsa, T. (2019). "Affective Disfigurations: Faceless Encounters between Literary Modernism and the Great War". Van Alphen, Jirsa 2019, 121-42. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004397712\_008.
- Jirsa, T. (2022). Disformations: Affects, Media, Literature. New York.
- Jones, D.H. (2016). "From Commonplace to Common Ground: Facial Injury in Kader Attia's Continuum of Repair". Journal of War & Culture Studies, 10(1), 66-81. https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2016.12 19585.
- Jones, D.H.; Gehrhardt, M. (eds) (2017). "Introduction: The Legacy of the Gueules Cassées: From Surgery to Art". Journal of War & Culture Studies, 10(1), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2016.12 21204.
- Karcher, E. (1984). Eros und Tod im Werk von Otto Dix: Studien zur Geschichte des Körpers in den Zwanziger Jahren. Münster.

Karcher, E. (1987). Otto Dix. Transl. by J. Ormrod. New York.

- Lubin, D.M. (2008). "Masks, Mutilation, and Modernity: Anna Coleman Ladd and the First World War". Archives of American Art Journal, 47(3-4), 4-15. https://doi.org/10.1086/aaa.47.3\_4.25435155.
- Marno, A. (2017). "The Disabled Veteran of World War I in the Mirror of Contemporary Art. The Reception of Otto Dix's Painting *The Cripples* in Yael Bartana's film *Degenerate Art Lives* (2010)". Millett-Gallant, Howie 2017, 119-31.

- Marno, A. (2020). "Chapter 10 War, Surgery and the Face: On the Perception of Photographs of Face Injured Soldiers of World War I in Present Art". Jakob, F.; Presiado, M. (eds). *War and Art*. Leiden, 231-54. https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657702923 011.
- Marno, A. (2022). "Facially Disfigured Veterans of World War I in Present-Day Art: An Art Historical Analysis against the Background of Medical History". Millett-Gallant, Howie 2022, 157-71.
- McCallum, C.E. (2015). "Scorched by the Fire of War: Masculinity, War Wounds and Disability in Soviet Visual Culture, 1941-65". *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 93(2), 251-85. https://doi. org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.93.2.0251.
- Millett-Gallant, A.; Howie, E. (eds) (2017). *Disability and Art History*. Abingdon; New York.
- Millett-Gallant, A.; Howie, E. (eds) (2022). Disability and Art History from Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century. Abingdon; New York. https://doi. org/10.4324/9781003048602.
- Murray, A. (2023). Otto Dix and the Memorialization of World War I in German Visual Culture, 1914-1936. London; New York.
- Poore, C. (2007). Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture. Ann Arbor.
- Price, D. (2019). "A 'Prosthetic Economy': Representing the 'Kriegskrüppel' in the Weimar

Republic". Art History, 42(4), 750-79. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12459.

- Reznick, J.S. (2004). "Prostheses and Propaganda: Materiality and The Human Body in the Great War". Saunders, N.J. (ed.), *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, London; New York, 51-61.
- Saunders, N.J. (2004). Matters of Conflict: Material Culture Memory and the First World War. London.
- Somers, L.M. (2022). "Aesthetics of Disability and the Hybrid Body in Louise Bourgeois's Femme Maison". Millett-Gallant, Howie 2022, 204-24.
- Sontag, S. (2013). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London.
- Springer, P. (2002). Hand and Head: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Self-Portrait as Soldier. Berkeley.
- Sumpf, A. (2022). The Broken Years: Russia's Disabled War Veterans, 1904-1921. Cambridge. doi:10.1017/9781009047296.
- Sylvester, D. (1975). *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon*. London.
- Van Alphen, E. (1993). Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self. Cambridge.
- Van Alphen, E. (2019). "Chapter 8 Reading for Affects: Francis Bacon and the Work of Sensation". Van Alphen, Jirsa 2019, 163-76. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004397712\_010.
- Van Alphen, E.; Jirsa, T. (eds) (2019). *How to Do Things* with Affects. Leiden.