

# Outsiders

O tutti o nessuno

"Il y a 4 ans environ, j'étais dans le train. En face de moi, dans le compartiment un épouvantable petit vieux était assis. Sale, et manifestement, méchant, certaines de ses réflexions me le prouvèrent. Refusant de poursuivre avec lui une conversation sans bonheur, je voulus lire, mais malgré moi je regardais ce petit vieux: il était très laid. Son regard croisa, comme on dit, le mien et ce fut bref (...) je connus soudain le douloureux-oui!- douloureux sentiment que n'importe quel homme en "valait" exactement n'importe quel autre"

Jean Genet



**Boris Mikhailov** (1938)

*Case history.*

A set of 400 photographs.

Dye-transfer print

Dimensions variable.

1999

Saatchy Gallery, London

The confession by the French novelist and playwright Jean Genet (1910-1986) appears in *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, a pamphlet written by Genet while posing for Giacometti, and published in 1958. At the time Genet accepted to become Giacometti's sitter, around 1955, he was known in the Paris literary society as the epitome of anarchy. A compulsive thief and homosexual prostitute in his 20s, he was the man who had written his debut novel from prison and who had managed to transform his condition as an outsider into an advantage. With a father unknown, a mother who had abandoned him at an early age and placed him in institutional care, he became the image of the villain *malgré soi* and seduced Paris with his dysfunctional past, yet his casual encounter with the nasty, dirty old man on a train drags him to a slippery

territory where the distances between Self and Other dissolve. Genet's acknowledgement that everyman is worth the other seems to arise from a painful revelation: the monstrosity glimpsed into the gaze of the "Other" is our own.

Moments of epiphany through the gaze occur frequently in art whether language or representation based. In Franz Fanon's (1925-1961) 1952's "*L'expérience vécue du noir; peu noire, masques blancs*<sup>1</sup>," the author's account of his own experiences as a black man in the third world and in modern metropolis, features a strikingly similar traumatic encounter with the Other. Fanon was born in Martinique, a then French colony; his father, an African slave descendant, and his mother, the illegitimate child of a mixed raced couple, gave him a comfortable childhood and provided a good education; Fanon studied in the best schools of his country and then enrolled at the University of Lyon to pursue his studies at University. It was in Lyon that he experienced his encounter with himself as the Other through the eyes of a little girl who upon seeing him on the street said: "*Mamam, regarde le nègre, j'ai peur!*"<sup>2</sup>

According to Isaac Julien, the film maker and artist who in 1996 created a 73 minutes coloured drama documentary film on the life of Fanon:<sup>3</sup> "although he was Martinican, Fanon saw himself as totally French. (...) The shock he felt on arriving in Paris, on realizing he was not viewed – not at all- as French: that is something I understand in personal terms. I think those words would probably speak to any young black man in a city. As a student, they brought me closer to my own experience and gave me a language that expressed how actually I felt. Today I find Fanon's thoughts even more evocative. In addition to the complexities between whites and blacks, our lives in the West remain filled with an everyday violence. We still have the violence of the accusing look..."<sup>4</sup> The young girl's look caused a trauma in Fanon. Through her eyes, he dragged himself away from his body in a metaphorical haemorrhage and saw his double, his other and the white masque he was wearing.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, while in confronting the ugly, dirty and nasty old man's look on a train, Genet encountered the Other (as the rejected self)<sup>6</sup> with no mediation and concluded existentially: every man is worth the other (and therefore there is an Other in any of us); Fanon, who was probably aiming at the

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Fanon. *L'expérience vécue du Noir. Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*. Editions de Seuil, Paris, 1952

<sup>2</sup> "Mama, look a negro. I am scared!" In Franz Fanon. *L'expérience vécue du Noir. Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*. Editions de Seuil, Paris, 1952, pg 90

<sup>3</sup> *Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Mask* (1996). Film, 73mm Colour 35 mm. Sound. By Isaac Julien ( 1960)

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Julien, *Riot, Mask.*, pg 115. Published by the MOMA, 2013

<sup>5</sup> "Ce jour-là, désorienté, incapable d'être dehors avec l'autre, le blanc, qui impitoyable, m'emprisonnait, je me portai loin de mon être-là, me constituait objet. Qui était-ce pour moi, sinon un décollement, un arrachement, une hémorragie qui collait du sang noir sur tout mon corps?" That day, disoriented and unable to be outside with the Other, the white man who was holding me in prison, merciless, I dragged myself away from the being I was, becoming an object. Who was the other other than a disconnection, an hemorrhage pouring black blood down my whole body?

<sup>6</sup> In her famous essay: *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, published in 1980, in Paris, Julia Kristeva explores the distinction between the self and the other and defines abjection as the process by which one separates from unwanted bits of one self. "*The abject is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that "I" does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime, alienation a fortified existence*"

same conclusion, realised that his investigation into his own identity was alienated by the presence of the white man in him. Fanon's realisation that he was the Other for the white girl (and therefore the white man) prompted immediate questions such as: am I the abject? A rejected? The non-conformist simply because I am black? Also, on a deeper level, as an already practicing psychiatrist interested in the construction of identity, he might as well have asked another fundamental question: who is then the Other in me?



**Isaac Julien (1960)**  
*Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks*  
73mm Colour 35mm. Sound.  
1996  
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

“He sees himself being seen by a French child and this look from the place of the other completely destroys him because what it destroys is this false, what Fanon calls the depersonalised self, the colonial self which has been built in a sort of imitation of the coloniser over many years”<sup>7</sup>

If in order to guarantee his own identity the white man has to imagine the black as the Other, then who is there to guarantee the black's identity? The white possibly, but in which terms? And if blacks are

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<sup>7</sup> Direct quote from Isaac Julien's script: Franz Fanon, Black Skin White Masques

invited to identify with whites to escape discourses on binary oppositions White/Black, Self/Other, how can they find a way to confront with the otherness within themselves regardless of any racial differentiation?



**Isaac Julien (1960)**  
*Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks*  
73mm Colour 35mm. Sound.  
1996  
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Fanon's investigation in the formation of the black man's identity is central to Isaac Julien's film. His drama documentary, a collage of passages from Fanon's writings, interviews with witnesses who knew Fanon, and with critics influenced by his works, alongside archival material connecting his writing and the Algerian War<sup>8</sup>, plus fictional moments, explore key aspects of Fanon's work: his commitment to the independence of colonised people, but also and mainly his experience as a psychiatric dealing with issues of trauma, race and identity.

The dilemma of how one can investigate and explore a full black self in a culture where blackness is seen as an absence, as negativity and otherness was at the heart of Fanon's analysis and is central to many contemporary African American artists for whom self-portraiture is a challenging genre.



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<sup>8</sup> Fanon lived and worked as chef de service at the Bida-Joinville Psychiatric Hospital, between 1954 and 1957

**Steve McQueen (1960)**  
*7<sup>th</sup> Nov*  
35mm Single slide, sound  
Projection with soundtrack and room lightning  
2001  
Musé d'Art Moderne de la ville deParis

With his *7<sup>th</sup> of November*, the British born artist Steve McQueen appears to have found a strategy to circumvent the obstacle in choosing:

- a) to portray his cousin Marcus rather than himself
- b) to avoid the gaze as a powerful identifying criterion

*7<sup>th</sup> of Nov* is a 35 mm single slide which projects into a wall a shaved scatted black head which does not move; nothing moves in fact in the video with the exception of the voice of Marcus which tells the story of the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, the day he accidentally killed his brother Jonathan. "... *how can I explain that! It is too difficult*"- he says in his black Londoner accent.

Without having to look at Marcus, the viewer knows from the beginning that Marcus- something in his horizontal position on a slab, in his courage- is the "villain" and that he is black. Although allegedly improvised,<sup>9</sup>his monologue unfolds so brilliantly that it might have been staged- with its opening functioning as a prologue introducing the plot and simultaneously making the audience aware that what is going to follow will be deeply engaging,<sup>10</sup> the subsequent acceleration towards the explosive moment when death occurs and nothing can be done or said to bring life back,<sup>11</sup> "*This was real, this was really happening and my brother was lying on the floor stiff, with blood everywhere and things coming out from his head.* (...)- And gradually, as the voice recuperates its natural rhythm- the aftermaths of a tragedy.

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<sup>9</sup> There is evidence of improvisation in the occasional editing cuts (i.e: a couple of fuck) and in the moments when Marcus swallows, stops and think, repeats himself... However Marcus's tale is also a combination of conventional written devices: a beginning/a climax/and an end which loops back to the beginning- with the colloquial energy expressed through the use of the present tense, of dialogues, repetitions and tonal variations. Asked whether he and Marcus prepared at all, Steve McQueen says: "*I imagine he's told the story a thousand times to different people-parts of the story at least. I imagine it to be like a musician who improvises. You practice **My Funny Valentine** sixteen times, or all the time perhaps, but every night you improvise with this song, so it is different. Marcus knew he was being recorded, but after the first two or three minutes, you leave the conscious situation behind you and go into the unconscious, and you are interested in bringing something out of yourself that you can translate and give images through language*"

<sup>10</sup> *This is how it started, my brother come around,, I had just finished a shift at work...*

<sup>11</sup> After Jonathan finds Marcus semiautomatic gun under the pillow, Marcus inadvertently loads it while attempting to put the safety on. "*Have you got any matches, have you got a light*"- he asked and I said: "*John is just there*" As I have said: "*just there*" A massive bang and the rest is like a dream, but it was reality! (...) I am screaming, I am shouting. I am crying. I can't believe what's happening. I am hysterical really, that's the word (...) It was just a bang. It was a second and the blood, a second later, was flying up in the air hitting the ceiling ( ...) Please an ambulance, please an ambulance I shout. John has been shot: I shot my brother!

Marcus is somebody who has accepted his destiny and dealt with his internal guilt (he was the “black” soul, the grown up, the rebel who owned a gun, whereas Jonathan was his little innocent brother spoilt and loved by their mother, living at home and studying...) and come into terms with his external guilt; the guilt society inflicts on him (he is sent straight to prison after the accident). If you kill your brother, you are the Other ejected by the system of law. Marcus is a criminal, a murderer for society although what happened was an accident as he says repeatedly during his re-visitation of the events that occurred on that tragic day. Yet people around him the day of the accident had no doubts. Sirens were heard immediately, but when Marcus peeped out from the window, crying desperately for an ambulance, what he saw were police cars. *No ambulance came while I was shouting: John has been shot, I shot my brother, an ambulance please, an ambulance! The police arrived instead...*

Questions arise. Would the attitude of the witnesses have been different had Marcus been a white professional? Would he have been given the benefit of the doubt, had he looked less threatening, in other words: white? Maybe even more importantly, when crying hysterically: *“John has been shot ... I shot my brother”*? How many Marcus are there? And in Fanon’s terms who is the black one and who is the other wearing the white mask?

Contrary to Isaac Julian, Steve McQueen has repeatedly denied any political interest in issues of racism and colonial struggles. “I don’t deal with black and white, I don’t deal with taboos” and just eluded any questions on the subject<sup>12</sup> until in 2013 he produced and directed *12 years a slave*, a period drama film and an adaptation of the 1853 namesake memoir by Solomon Northup.

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<sup>12</sup>**Adrian Searle:** Did you feel like an outsider in art school? You came from a working-class background in west London. There weren’t many black students then?

**Steve McQueen:** Most of the kids there were middle class. I had a wonderful friend on my foundation course called Indika from Sri Lanka who was very disciplined. He used to go to life-drawing classes every bloody day. I admired him and followed his routine. I just wanted to be a painter; I wanted to be the best I could be.