A SMPL likeness

0x6e31 June 26th, 2022 2 Collected



> *Look at them, my dear witless double. When I first set eyes on them our resemblance struck me as spectacular, bordering on the freakish. I had never supposed it possible that there could exist such a living duplicate. A pixel perfect likeness. As my gaze lingered upon this fascinating creature its utility began to make itself known to me. I became obsessed with what the very existence of a live circulating copy of my face might enable. We two, I thought, are as alike as two drops of blood.*

The preceding paragraph is derived from Vladimir Nabokov's 1937 novel *Despair*. I've taken the liberty of recomposing and updating Nabokov's prose, introducing a few subtle inflections of our contemporary digital culture. It's what I do. Hermann Karlovich, the first person protagonist of *Despair*, is a wealthy but unfulfilled businessman suffering from a debilitating existential angst. One day while out walking, he happens upon a man sleeping under a thornbush on a hillside. Hermann is immediately transfixed by the stranger's image. *That man, especially when he slept, when his features were motionless, showed me my own face, my mask, the flawlessly pure image of my corpse* … The life of Felix Wohlfahrt, Hermann's innocent doppelgänger, is only minimally acknowledged by our excitable narrator. We learn that Felix is poor and homeless, an *oaf* who exhibits *the whole bouquet of human stupidity*. His wellbeing is ultimately of little concern to Hermann, however. Over the course of the novel Felix is taken for a mere object, a fungible prop in a murderous scheme that he has unknowingly inspired in Hermann. The details of this scheme, a masterful conceptual artwork in Hermann's own estimation, are predictable enough. If Felix were to be found dead in certain circumstances … *his* fate would appear as *Hermann's* fate … Hermann would effectively be recused from his own tedious life …

and Felix himself would hardly be missed … Hermann's ever faithful wife Lydia could claim his ample life insurance and …

As Felix is to Hermann, so my SMPL #030754 is to me, your Gilbert. While Hermann's scheme was inspired by a chance meeting, I could rely on SMPLverse, an interactive digital artwork that conveniently facilitated the discovery of my own *flawless* likeness. And just like Hermann's encounter with Felix, the moment when SMPLs began to appear on my timeline was truly fateful. Ever since I saw those hollow dummies, staring blankly into non-space, a plan — *this* plan, the formulation of *these* words and images — has preoccupied me. SMPLverse draws on an open source repository of 100,000 nameless nobodies. These completely synthetic images of human faces were generated as training data for Microsoft's HoloLens mixed-reality project. Holders of a SMPL token need only present themselves to a webcam interface to acquire their duplicate. When the hour of the SMPLverse mint came, I offered my head up and a facial recognition algorithm found the best match for my image in its repository. The closeness of that match was expressed through the attribution of a *confidence* score, a fractional number between 0 and 1. At the time of writing, the confidence score of 0.527 between #030754 and I remains the highest in the collection. This plan SMPLy cannot fail.

Hermann, though, is plainly an *overconfident* man. Signs appear everywhere in Nabokov's plot that his protagonist is not always as observant as he was in that initial, electrifying sighting of Felix. Hermann has a somewhat selective gaze, and we attentive readers spot numerous mistakes creeping into his criminal plan. Nevertheless, his compulsion seems unstoppable and he does attend to certain details with exceptional rigour. In the novel's concluding action scene, on the edge of a remote forest at dusk, Hermann performs a grooming ritual on Felix, resolving any outstanding disparities in their resemblance. Having been given an unlikely explanation and promised a cash reward for his participation in these macabre proceedings, unsuspecting Felix is compliant. Hermann shaves the face of his twin, thins out the eyebrows to match his own, brushes back the hair. As they swap clothes, Hermann notices Felix's filthy toenails and a queasy pedicure is performed. When everything is judged to be in order Hermann shoots Felix in the back and decouples himself from the identity of Hermann Karlovich.



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A SMPL likeness

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Except Hermann and Felix did not, in fact, look alike. I would estimate no more than a 0.228, if that. Their resemblance was imagined by Hermann, a telling feature of his

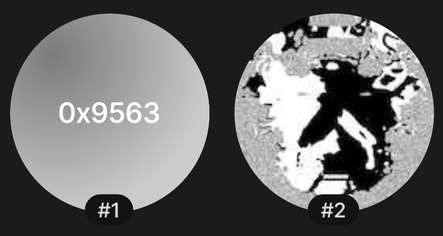
descent into psychosis. The collapse of his plan does not take long to register. In hiding in Italy, we find Hermann distraught by the reporting of his crime in the international press. Detectives have neglected to recognise Hermann in the corpse of his double! Instead — the morons! — they seem distracted by minor inconsistencies at the scene. (Hermann does begrudgingly admit to the small logistical mistake of having left one of Felix's belongings in his abandoned car: a walking stick into which the victim had carved his full name.) Deluded to the very end, Hermann sees the reception of his artwork not as evidence of his own troubled mental state but as an absurd failure of interpretative imagination on the part of those investigating his unspeakable crime.

Poor Hermann is scuppered. He certainly turned out to be incompetent, but was he really an evil man? Hermann, I might alternatively claim, was a man alienated by the transition between two paradigms of identity formation. Hermann belonged to an early twentieth century European society still defined by *sincerity*. In the sincerity paradigm identity was not an expression of the individual, but was *predefined* by their standing in societal class structures. It was on this account that Nabokov had to identify Hermann as a middle-class somebody and Felix as a lower-class nobody for his narrative to be believable. In Hermann's time, sincerity was on the cusp of being subverted by *authenticity*. In the coming authenticity paradigm, the individual would draw their identity not from external expectations but from *within themselves*, and *in spite of* societal norms. Hermann yearned to become his *authentic* self (a born again playboy on the Italian riviera, perhaps) but the constraints of *sincerity* (joylessly upholding his responsibilities in Berlin) were inescapable to him. The extreme mental state which this yearning produced in Hermann strikingly anticipate the SMPLverse, and digital culture's native identity paradigm: *profilicity*. In a profilicity paradigm, one's identity is neither pre-defined nor discovered, it is constructed and maintained strategically, as if from a third person perspective. At the end of *Despair*, in a rare break from introspection, Hermann offers us his lucid vision of the very future in which SMPL #030754 and I might soon find ourselves:

> *It even seems to me sometimes that my basic theme, the resemblance between two persons, has a profound allegorical meaning. This remarkable physical likeness probably appealed to me (subconsciously!) as the promise of that ideal sameness which is to unite people in the classless society of the future; and by striving to make use of an isolated case, I was, though still blind to social truths, fulfilling, nevertheless, a certain social function … I visualise a new world, where all men will resemble one another as Hermann and Felix did; a world of Helixes and Fermanns; a world where the worker dead at the feet of his machine will be at once replaced by his perfect double smiling the serene smile of perfect socialism.*

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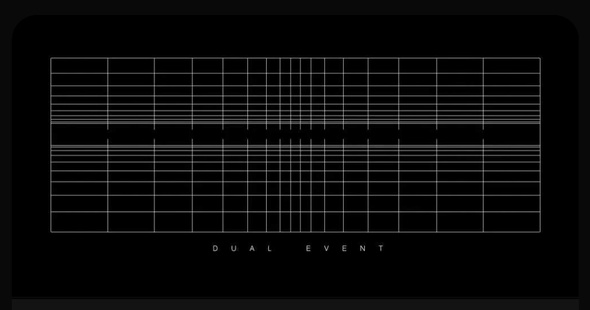
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