

## ◆ Chapter 10

### **Early Modern Deepfakes: Honing Critical Spectatorship through Pixelated Performances**

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Deepfakes are best known, thanks to increasingly powerful technologies of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, for how they defy our ability to distinguish between reality and deception, thereby posing a daunting threat to an informed public and democratic global order. But these kinds of synthetic media often draw their entertainment value from what amounts to an inverse proposition: absurdly comical, uncanny, or otherwise unlikely mashups that go viral not because they challenge an existing reality but because they so bluntly flaunt its most basic parameters. Such is the case with a deepfake video from 2019 that superimposed the face of Steve Buscemi onto his fellow actor Jennifer Lawrence as she delivers remarks, in her own voice, at a Golden Globes award ceremony.<sup>1</sup> Another viral example features the comedian and actor Bill Hader on late-night television doing impressions of Al Pacino and Arnold Schwarzenegger, but doctored to show his face morphing into theirs.<sup>2</sup> Entire YouTube channels are dedicated to similarly outlandish gags that transpose one actor's face for another through deepfake sleights of hand known as "face swap" or "face reenactment." Clearly, these examples are much more benign than the growing body of digital counterfeits that falsify or distort political or historical events, not only because of salient differences in content and tone, but, more fundamentally, because they wear their deception on their sleeve. Not even the most gullible or deluded consumer of such humorous deepfakes is likely to believe they are somehow real, seamless and sophisticated though they may be, and so their potential for disinformation is negligible.

Such examples are nonetheless conceptually useful insofar as they center the problem of actorly performance and remind us that the reception of deepfakes is sometimes more nuanced than their portrayal in certain popular and official outlets might lead us to assume.<sup>3</sup> Each of these facets will be germane

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to my discussion of an early modern Spain in which, according to a well-known maxim, everyone became an actor performing a role.<sup>4</sup> In particular, I will focus on how the development of progressively realistic acting techniques in the popular entertainment venue of the playhouse led to an emphasis on what became known, ironically, as “true” performance. Such techniques inform anecdotes of actors so skilled at embodying various emotions as to simulate physiological functions usually regarded as involuntary, such as weeping or blushing. Insofar as they challenge the pre-existing cultural confines of a shared reality, I would contend that these exceptionally realistic affects and gestures constitute a salient vector of what David R. Castillo and William Egginton call the “medialogy” of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain.<sup>5</sup> While a good deal of scholarship of the period has devoted itself to exploring the epistemological stakes of such quintessentially Baroque conceptual binds as the *theatrum mundi* or all-the-world’s-a-stage trope,<sup>6</sup> the implications of bodily performance for this medialogy have largely been overlooked.

Renaissance thinkers like Alberti rescued the classical notion of regretting the lack of a proverbial window on the chest that would allow one to know another’s true feelings.<sup>7</sup> Implicit in this arresting conceit is the ongoing threat of verbal deception and its corollary desire for material assurances of sincerity, a desire that for centuries was fulfilled by bodily gestures and other involuntary, proto-linguistic signifiers. Much as today we might fixate on such telltale hints as fidgeting, gesticulation, eye contact, vocal modulation, and other microexpressions if we suspect someone to be lying, so too did premoderns lean on similar clues to underwrite a spoken vow. Though these signs had long been held as more reliable than words for determining such typically inscrutable questions as whether another’s love was genuine,<sup>8</sup> part of my contention here is that the increasing professional mastery of theatrical gesture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries eroded the dependability of such reassurances. By figuring these performances of emotional depth as expressly early modern versions of deepfakes, this essay asks how the technologies of artificial intelligence might parallel the *technes* of theatrical artifice, and thus how another society in the throes of epistemological instability coped with newfound challenges to its sense of reality.

Not unlike the growing misgivings over deepfakes today, dramatic performance alarmed many early modern commentators, many of whom agitated, with periodic success, for the closure of theaters. Though not quite as easy as consuming YouTube or TikTok videos, dramatic performance was both abundant and accessible in early modern Spain, from the *corrales* to the Feast of Corpus Christi, for which, beginning in the seventeenth century, *autos sacramentales* were publicly staged in the streets and plazas of cities across Iberia. Theatricality, or what José Antonio Maravall long ago called “the social role

of artifice,” is said to have permeated accordingly not only Spanish Baroque drama and the royal court but society at large.<sup>9</sup> Yet such paradigms have often obscured the means by which individuals, for sundry purposes of everyday life, might rather have presented their authentic selves and managed to judge the sincerity of others, even as they frequented playhouses as an innocuous form of diversion.<sup>10</sup> Thus my aim in what follows is not to dispute the Debor-dian heritage of much scholarship of Spanish classical theater as a spectacle for the masses, a form of social control, and a mouthpiece for monarchical absolutism, but instead to reflect critically on how early moderns responded to the increasingly fraught distinctions between truth and pretense that the theater was evidently prompting, and how they might have fashioned strategies for grappling with such dilemmas in everyday life.<sup>11</sup> I argue that the growing realism of declamation and theatrical performance in early modernity—which Castillo and Egginton call “the first inflationary age”<sup>12</sup>—required individuals and institutions to develop tools analogous to what experts in digital forensics today employ to expose the pixelation, visual inconsistencies, and other tell-tale signs of deepfake videos and images. The increasingly nuanced abilities of early moderns to recognize untruth in what, to employ a visual anachronism, we might call pixelated performances likewise offer lessons in media literacy for our contemporary moment. Ultimately, my purpose is neither to essentialize early modern performance nor to trivialize the impact of AI-generated deepfakes, but to suggest that, by considering them together, they can offer mutual lessons in visual information literacy and what I will call critical spectatorship.

### **Of Gesture and Jedi**

Taking a cue from the whimsical incongruity of deepfake mashups, allow me to begin with the remotest of anecdotes, one from “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” Since the first film premiered in 1977, *Star Wars* has become one of the most successful franchises in cinematic history, spawning multiple sequels and spinoffs, not to mention a global, multi-billion-dollar merchandising industry. With its purchase of the production company Lucasfilm in 2012, the entertainment juggernaut Disney acquired the rights to *Star Wars*, ushering the sci-fi series and its loyal followers into the era of streaming media. To capitalize on the audience’s thirst for nostalgia, the studio decided that *The Book of Boba Fett*, a spinoff that premiered in 2021 but which was set in the era of the original trilogy of films, would feature extensive scenes with the fan-favorite character of Luke Skywalker. Instead of recasting the iconic role, however, with the help of a performance artist, stunt double, computer-

generated imagery (CGI), and deepfake “de-aging” technology, producers charged the actor Mark Hamill with reprising his turn as the young lightsaber-wielding Jedi. Though such techniques allowed the seventy-year-old actor to strikingly recuperate Skywalker’s youthful appearance, reactions among the notoriously stickling fanbase were mixed, due largely to deficiencies in emotional expression. One critic panned the “poor simulacrum” for “the uncanny, blank visage of Mark Hamill’s frozen 1983 face,” which betrayed “almost no emotion or humanity.” Noting that “even brief flares of frustration or disappointment never quite reach his eyes,” the commentator argued that casting a different, younger actor for the role would have been preferable to such “stiff de-aged deepfakes.”<sup>13</sup> Another pundit used the example of the rejuvenated Jedi and its detractors to explain that, due to technical features inherent to synthetic media created with the aid of AI, “deepfake transformations have a fundamental problem with subtlety of emotion.”<sup>14</sup>

A set of similar, if sometimes inverse, concerns with the emotional subtleties of actorly performance roiled spectators centuries ago in early modern Spain. Here playwrights like the prolific Lope de Vega shunned classical models to establish the *comedia nueva*, which, not unlike such modern big-screen blockbusters as *Star Wars*, was designed to appeal to the masses and featured extensive action, popular themes, and special effects of stage machinery. In a bid for greater emotional realism and more compelling performances, theater companies developed correspondingly innovative acting techniques. Rather than adhering slavishly to the traditional precept of *imitatio naturalis*, by which performers enacted often histrionic gestures that nonetheless were purported to mimic nature, acting troupes began to pioneer subtler, more embellished techniques, spurred by the audacious notion that dramatic performance, like the fine arts of poetry and painting, could transcend the natural world.<sup>15</sup> So it is that by the end of the sixteenth century the humanist and poetic theorist Alonso López Pinciano could advise that “el actor mire la persona que va a imitar y de tal manera se transforme en ella, que a todos parezca no imitación, sino propiedad” (the actor look at the person he is going to imitate and thus be transformed into that person, so that it appears to everyone that he no longer imitates, but makes it his own).<sup>16</sup> Lope would echo this prescription when writing in his *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*, “que se transforme todo el recitante, / y con mudarse a sí, mude al oyente” (that the actor should transform himself entirely, and by mutating himself, should move the audience).<sup>17</sup> Like the courtly principle of *sprezzatura*, such transformations demanded the paradox of a “descuido cuidadoso” (careful carelessness), as Cervantes describes it in his play *Pedro de Urdemalas*, or a rehearsal so meticulous as to appear effortless.<sup>18</sup> In other words, a counterfeit convincing enough as to be confused with the real thing.

## Early Modern Face Swaps

One can already intuit how such developments might strain the cordons between reality and the fictional enclave of the theater and how they might distress officials tasked with upholding political authority and normative standards of religious truth. Imagine their alarm, then, at the fact that these techniques became known as “true” acting. López Pinciano, for example, stressed “lo mucho que importa que el actor haga su oficio con mucho primor y muy de veras; que, pues nos llevan nuestros dineros de veras, y nos hacen esperar aquí dos horas, razón es que hagan sus acciones con muchas veras” (how important it is that the actor do his job with much skill and very truly; since they take our money truly and make us wait here two hours, it is only fair that they should do their acting with lots of truth).<sup>19</sup> Such slippages recall Debord’s axiom that “[i]n a world that *really* has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood.”<sup>20</sup> But beyond López Pinciano’s touch of comic irreverence and more general semantic ironies, the equating of theatricality with truth seemed to engender practical quandaries as well. In the dedication to *El rústico del cielo*, Lope recounts the case of an actor whose embodiment of a role was so complete as to be mistaken for the character in real life: “Sucedió una cosa rara: que un famoso representante . . . se transformó en él, de suerte que, siendo de los más galanes y gentil hombres que habemos conocido, le imitó de manera que a todos parecía el verdadero y no el fingido; no sólo en la habla y en los donaires pero en el mismo rostro” (A strange thing happened: a famous actor . . . transformed himself into the character so much that, being one of the most gallant gentlemen that we have known, he imitated [the character] in a way that everyone thought it was truly him and not feigned; not only in his speech and poise but in his very face).<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the dramaturge cautions in the *Arte nuevo* that “si acaso un recitante / hace un traidor, es tan odioso a todos, / que lo que va a comprar no se le vende, / y huye el vulgo dél cuando le encuentra, / y si es leal le prestan y convidan / y hasta los principales le honran y aman, / le buscan, le regalan y le aclaman” (if an actor happens to play a traitor, he is so hated by everyone that when he wants to buy something they refuse to sell it, and commoners flee whenever they run into him, but if he plays a loyal character they serve and favor him, and even people of high station honor and love him, seek him out, cater to him, and acclaim him).<sup>22</sup> In Lope’s telling, the conflation of performers with characters became something of a regular occurrence, redounding to the actor’s benefit or misfortune accordingly. It is therefore not surprising that many became known less by their given name than by that of their most famous roles, as was the case with Pedro Manuel de Castilla, who acquired the professional alias of *Mudarra* for his role in Álvaro Cubillo de Aragón’s *El rayo de Andalucía*, which had been inspired by Lope’s

*El bastardo Mudarra*, or Ángela Rogel, who became known as Ángela Dido for starring in Guillén de Castro's *Dido y Eneas*.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most remarkable cases of actorly transformation and performative virtuosity was that of María Riquelme, who was born into a family of theatrical producers in Madrid and acted in the premiere of Lope's hallowed tragedy *El castigo sin venganza* in 1633. That same year, the playwright raved that she "[e]s singular en los *afectos*, por camino que no imita de nadie, ni aún podrá hallar quien la imite" (is unequalled in the *affects*, in such a way that she imitates no one, nor will you find anyone who can imitate her).<sup>24</sup> Juan Caramuel was similarly effusive in his praise of Riquelme, who according to the theologian and polymath was "apprehensiva tam forti praeditae, ut inter loquendum vultus colorem cum omnium admiratione mutaret; nam, si in theatro fausta et felicia narrarentur, roseo colore suffusa auscultabat; si autem aliqua infausta circumstantia intercurreret, illico pallida reddebatur. Et in hoc erat unica, quam nemo valeret imitari" (endowed with such versatility that, as she was acting, to the wonder of everyone she would change the color of her face, because if something fortunate and happy was being narrated, she would hear it with a rosy countenance, and if something unfortunate, then she would at once turn pale, and in this she was unique and inimitable).<sup>25</sup> Given the widespread understanding, in the early modern period as well as today, that the blush is a wholly involuntary psycho-physiological response, Riquelme's apparent ability to summon it at will on stage is nothing short of extraordinary. Insofar as the blush was regarded as a natural sign of virtue and feminine modesty, the notion that it could be simulated artificially situates Riquelme's case at the extreme end of early modern deepfakes. In effect, while extolling her in verse the poet and preacher Hortensio Félix Paravicino portrayed her abilities in terms of truth and lie, even if he appeared to be surprisingly untroubled by such slippages: "María, a tal propiedad / vuestra imitación aspira / que a hilos de la mentira / corre sangre a la verdad" (María, your acting aspires to such mastery that, on threads of lies, blood runs to the truth).<sup>26</sup>

By the sixteenth century, tears too had become theatrical. St. Ignatius of Loyola, legendary for being lachrymose, instructed his followers to summon them at will and "with much effort to force [themselves] to sorrow, mourn, and weep."<sup>27</sup> Because the concerted emphasis on sobbing led the "don de lágrimas" to become a prized social distinction, the presence of throngs with this gift of tears likewise became almost *de rigueur* for the early modern *ars moriendi* of self-respecting families. The demand for visibly bereaved bystanders likewise inspired the more enterprising among them to ply newfound services as *lloronas*, rented penitents, and professional mourners. Eventually, their crocodile tears in turn would provoke grumbling about how the most solemn, moving occasions had devolved into a hypocritical spectacle

of artifice, bereft of authenticity.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, such complaints echo general reservations over what some perceived to be a decadent, superficial society rapt with its own image, as well as more pointed, if largely muffled, misgivings over an increasingly well-oiled Spanish imperio-religious bureaucracy that projected a simulacrum of grandiosity at the expense of the material needs of its citizenry. One recalls here Cervantes's burlesque poem "Al tmulo del rey que se hizo en Sevilla," in which he tirades with veiled yet devastating satire against the royal propaganda of an opulent catafalque constructed for the occasion of King Philip II's own funeral.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, such indictments betray a more discrete though no less troubling anxiety that, despite their origin in more austere forms of religious devotion, behind these ceremonial outpourings of feeling was a startling abundance of fakery, and, as a result, like deepfakes today, they were undermining the collective ability to discriminate between reality and illusion.

Further signs of an inability or unwillingness to demarcate the fictional borders of dramatic performance emerge in the abundant writings of moralists who inveighed against the supposed iniquities of the theater and the depraved conduct of its practitioners. Though himself a dramatist, Lupercio Leonardo de Argensola denounced in 1598 that, backstage, actors were "bebiendo, jurando, blasfemando y jugando con el hbito y forma exterior de Santos, de ngeles, de la Virgen Nuestra Seora y del mismo Dios" (drinking, swearing, blaspheming, and gambling in their costumes of saints, angels, the Virgin Mary, and even God), while, onstage, "fingiendo lgrimas y haciendo juego de lo que siempre habia de ser veras y tratado por gente limpia" (feigning tears and making light of what always should have been truthful and treated by upstanding people.)<sup>30</sup> Almost a century later, the preacher Ignacio Camargo was still incensed by the dissonance he perceived between saintly characters and the abominable lifestyles of the performers who portrayed them: "[Q]u fealdad ms indigna que ver hacer el papel de la Virgen Pursima y Reina Soberana de los ngeles (de quien no podemos sufrir el ver una pintura indecente y fea) a una vil mujercilla, conocida por todo el auditorio por liviana y escandalosa, recibir la embajada del ngel y decir las palabras divinas del Evangelio?" (What a more disgraceful ugliness than seeing a vile wench, known by the whole audience as lewd and scandalous, play the role of the Supremely Pure Virgin and Sovereign Queen of Angels [of whom we cannot stand to see an indecent or ugly painting] and receive the embassy of the angel and say the divine words of the Gospel?).<sup>31</sup> These nagging incongruities that so rankled early modern commentators recall today's deepfake mashups and face swaps of actors, even if they drew their notoriety more from moral panic than from benign entertainment.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to these objections to actors' roles, controversies over the legitimacy of the theater—which led on more than one occasion to the closure of Spanish playhouses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—irrupted primarily from the content of the *comedias*, whose plots of amorous passion and wiles were judged to be especially pernicious to young women. There was also an awareness, albeit tacit, of the theatrical medium's more general threat to beguile and dupe the senses. Juan Pérez de Montalbán, a playwright as well as a priest, justified the printing of his dramas in 1635 on the grounds that, though they had already met with success on the live stage, “tal vez el ademán de la dama, la representación del héroe, la cadencia de las voces, el ruido de los consonantes y la suspensión de los afectos suelen engañar las orejas más atentas y hacer que pasen por rayos los relámpagos” (perhaps the gesture of the lady, the portrayal of the hero, the cadence of the voices, the sound of the verses, and the captivation of one's emotions tend to trick the most attentive ears and fool one like a bolt out of the blue).<sup>33</sup> In both intensity and scope, the multifaceted artifice of theatrical performance—including the increasingly verisimilar emotive gestures of those on stage—possessed greater potential to deceive the masses than words on a printed page, which relied on *phantasia* or the imaginative faculty of a relatively minute body of literate readers in early modern Spain. It is true that the period's most famous fictional reader, Don Quixote, falls prey to believing that the fantastic feats described in chivalric romance are real, prompting a signal discussion between the novel's Canon and priest over the lamentable state of national literary and dramatic arts. The latter, in reference to the Spanish *comedia nueva*, proclaims “[q]ue todo esto es en perjuicio de la verdad y en menoscabo de las historias” (that all of this is to the detriment of truth and the diminishment of history).<sup>34</sup> Even so, the religious characters' grievances are less philosophical than aesthetic. They revolve not so much around a capacity of mimetic art for outright deception than they do questions of decorum and classical Aristotelian precepts of unity. In other words, even with an embodiment of the Platonic dangers of fiction right in front of them, the Canon and the priest do not subject literature and drama to blanket censure nor appeal for their banishment from the public sphere, but instead clamor for more robust oversight of their content. Implicit in this forbearance is a recognition that everyday readers are not Don Quixotes, that consumers of fiction by and large can be trusted to discern it from fact, and that the vast majority of theatergoers know that what they see on stage, corrupting as it may be to their moral sensibilities, is not real.



### (De)claiming Sincerity, from Idylls to Inquisition

Yet even if there existed little explicit concern that plays could loosen spectators' grips on reality, the development of increasingly sophisticated acting techniques in the highly popular venue of the theater may have influenced other forms of fictional literature and aspects of early modern lived experience in subtle but significant ways. Chief among them, as I have suggested elsewhere, is the likelihood that the bodily gestures, facial expressions, and emotional cues that were being mastered by practitioners of "true" acting began to undermine the longstanding utility of these same cues as markers of natural sincerity.<sup>35</sup> Two examples, taken from contexts at the polar extremes of credulity and suspicion, will be instructive for understanding this process. The first is the literary genre of pastoral romance, whose rustic stories of enamored herders with a penchant for lyric poetry became fashionable with such works as Jorge de Montemayor's *Los siete libros de la Diana* (1559) or Gaspar Gil Polo's *Diana enamorada* (1564). A hallmark of pastoralism—and no doubt one reason why the mode has sometimes been unfairly derided as nothing more than escapist fantasy—is that its characters are governed by an innate sincerity, almost never resorting to deceit to gain the upper hand over competing suitors to their beloved. In short, one would be hard-pressed to imagine a space more alien to the concept of deepfakes than the pastoral bower.

By the time of Cervantes's *La Galatea* (1585), however, the upstanding herders of Spanish bucolic literature had begun to manifest an awareness of the disquieting possibility that the emotional gestures so central to their lovelorn laments could be less than genuine. For example, in the highly theatrical episode of Rosaura and Grisaldo, in which his rejection incites her to attempt suicide, the ambiguity of non-verbal cues precipitates her despair. Though she explains having found herself "satisfecha que la voluntad de Grisaldo de la mía un punto no discrepaba, según él me lo dio a entender con muchas y muy verdaderas señales" (satisfied that Grisaldo's wishes did not differ from mine in the least, as he gave me to understand with many very true signs), her hyperbolic emphasis on the truth of those signs actually calls their reliability into question.<sup>36</sup> Whether Grisaldo's "señales" were consciously feigned or merely a distorted product of Rosaura's wishful thinking is beside the point. What matters is that the text brooks the *possibility* that such outward cues can be feigned, throwing their reliability under a scrutiny far more intense than in foregoing exemplars of pastoral literature. Uncertainties of this nature culminate in a scene midway through *La Galatea* in which several shepherds stage a poetic competition, delivered in the form of an amoebaeon eclogue, over who is the most afflicted by the woes of love. But their performance is also replete with declamation, gesture, and action—such as when they pretend

to hide behind bushes to eavesdrop on another's laments and act startled when catching sight of the voyeur. Such details reveal the specular aspects of the production on stage, as well as those of the identical vocational practices routinely enacted by the many fellow herders in the audience. What I wish to underscore is that this metatheatrical moment not only ironizes the pastoral enterprise at large, but also exposes the potential artifice of the gestural idiom otherwise regarded as an unfailing guarantor of authentic love, sorrow, jealousy, despair, and other feelings essential to their emotional experience. In part, this suggestive change has to do with Cervantes's impulse to inject a vital dose of realism into a genre whose idealized conventions suddenly were not quite as riveting for readers, and is thus consistent with other foreign elements—such as duels, marauders, naval combat, and violent death—that the author deigned to incorporate into the pastoral *La Galatea*, his first effort at prose. But because of the strong, persistent influence that dramaturgy exerted on all of Cervantes's narrative,<sup>37</sup> it is conceivable that the movement toward more realistic acting techniques also had a hand in the waning credibility of gesture among the most honest and trusting characters in all of early modern Spanish literature. If this is true, then few places were immune to the cross-contamination of theatrical performance, even those most thoroughly insulated from the vices of mendacity and imposture.

If early modern pastoral represented the apogee of the values of implicit trust and sincerity, then the historical institution of the Spanish Inquisition—founded in 1478 to address the problem of false converts—entailed their nadir. Suspicion, subterfuge, and the presumption of wrongdoing underpinned the Inquisitional procedures that, over the centuries and across Iberia, persecuted Jews, Muslims, Protestants, witches, and others whose cultural, spiritual, or ideological traditions were deemed heretical. Thanks to the institution's scrupulous recordkeeping, transcripts of the many thousands of Inquisition trials survive in historical archives. But scholars have often overlooked the fact that the accused deposed not in writing but before a live audience of inquisitors and that their testimony therefore could incorporate gestures, affects, and body language that were trademarks of theatrical performance. Reconstructing these non-verbal, improvisational aspects of Inquisition trials allows us to see that the Holy Office, despite epitomizing political and religious power, was also susceptible to pretense, to the increasingly realistic theatrical gestures that were enlivening the *comedia* and alarming its detractors. Careful scrutiny of these trials, especially in the phase of sentencing, reveals that inquisitors attended to minute, subjective markers of prisoners' emotional states—often codified as “muestras” or “señales de arrepentimiento”—to determine whether they were genuinely remorseful of their actions.<sup>38</sup> Those who manifested these signs of contrition—among which the most common were genuflection, sighs, and tears—tended

to obtain greater clemency than more aloof or unemotional detainees. Notably, however, because of their cultural ubiquity, all of these gestural and affective cues could be mastered rather easily by those wishing to dissemble their true motives or confessional identity. Kneeling, for instance, was a highly ritualized physical posture that was widespread in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian forms of religiosity, liturgical ceremonies, and penitential settings. Though it is generally interpreted as a sign of exasperation today, in early modern Iberia the sigh was another intercultural signifier that could also connote psychological affliction and engender sympathy.<sup>39</sup> And, as already mentioned, due in large part to their association with Counter-Reformation bids to stress the sacramental status of penance, ritual tears were omnipresent across a vast array of confessional and communal traditions, including funerals, processions, and public spectacles.

Transcripts of Inquisition trials often record whether the accused shed tears, emitted sighs, or dropped to their knees, but these signs did not result in a mechanical process of selecting a correlative penalty, a rote checklist by which inquisitors meted out a punishment based merely on the presence or absence of emotionality. Crucially, rather, they appear to have scrutinized the much more nuanced and subjective aspects of detainees' affective state, disposition, and mien, as evidenced by the mid-sixteenth-century trial of Bartolomé Sánchez. Accused of heresy, the wool carder from Cuenca had already passed through varying rounds of questioning before one day requesting an audience with the inquisitor Pedro Cortes. Instead of adding to his testimony, however, he remained silent while weeping with abandon, an act he explained by claiming insanity and offering an apparently feeble attempt at admitting wrongdoing. For despite his shedding of copious tears, Cortes remained unconvinced, expounding on the difference between genuine atonement and attrition, a confession tendered for self-serving reasons. He concluded by imploring Sánchez to “[s]eparate yourself from that [crying] and throw it away. Serving God with work, He will give you the reward and consolation that you desire.”<sup>40</sup> Alert to the possibility of theatricality and subterfuge, attuned to the minute subtleties of emotional expression, and informed by their own intuition, inquisitors attempted to winnow authentic remorse from sometimes desperate displays of self-preservation. As a matter of course these arbiters of religious orthodoxy grappled with questions of true or false, and more specifically with whether a given testimony was genuine or embellished by the trappings of theatrical performance. Much as we may rightly reprehend their ideological motives, procedures, and objectives, it is in these inquisitorial trials that we encounter an improbable yet informative case of how early moderns, by scrutinizing ever more subtle gestural and affective cues, navigated these fields of uncertainty, how they persevered to distinguish between truth and deception, authenticity and artifice, in a society whose theatrical aspirations were progressively blurring such distinctions.

## From the Specter of Fakery to Critical Spectatorship

How many early modern individuals were genuinely unable to distinguish fiction from reality or, recalling the anecdotes noted above, actually believed that an actor was somehow the character? Likely no higher a percentage than those today who readily take the bait of synthetic media or swallow the latest conspiracy theory. What I wish to highlight is the opportunity to parse the reception of early modern as well as contemporary deepfakes, to realize that, much like the comical video mashups of actors like Jennifer Lawrence and Steve Buscemi with which I opened this essay, the apparent conflation of fiction and reality is sometimes but an innocuous pastime, a zany expression of fandom. Early moderns were not universally gullible or naïve to the prospect of staged authenticity, even those of the majority who were illiterate and therefore denied the full benefits of what today we would deem critical readership. Many of them surely were capable of spotting the faint, unnatural tokens of fabrication on a bodily surface, the material equivalent of aberrant pixels on a screen. Whether or not deepfakes end up posing the qualitatively different, existential peril that many fear, this early modern context is instructive, for it shows the need not only to adapt to a newfound threat but also to recognize the inherent limitations of those adaptations, and therefore to build collective resilience.

Deepfakes, inflationary media, and, most recently, generative AI models such as ChatGPT—which has “a notorious tendency to spew biased, harmful, and factually incorrect content” and to “state both facts and falsehoods with the same high level of confidence”<sup>41</sup>—appear destined to push further into the mainstream. But as these developments stir growing apprehension over contemporary civilization and humanity’s common future, it may behoove us to look to the past. Even in our technologically mediated world of the twenty-first century, we unconsciously rely on non-verbal gestures to guide our interactions with others and, at times, as a beacon for judging sincerity. Humans have an innate instinct, tied intimately to our survival, for deciphering the subjective emotional cues of others, which is why even some of the most sophisticated deepfakes, such as that of Luke Skywalker, strike some of us as aberrant, uncanny, or conspicuously flat.<sup>42</sup> Thanks to the difficulty for machines in mastering the finer shades of emotional nuance necessary to produce an absolutely convincing replica, we in a sense have our own built-in deepfake detection system.<sup>43</sup> Of course, there are several caveats that should be acknowledged. First, just as our evolutionary prowess for spotting deception among bona fide fellow humans is far from infallible, so too must we recognize the limitations of such abilities in the digital realm. Skilled fabulists can dupe even the most astute of observers, and an excessive reliance on instincts, hunches, and gut feelings likewise can push a healthy skepticism

into paranoid suspicion, abetting the very conspiracy theories so often fueled by manipulative media. And, given the rapid pace at which machine learning has advanced in just the last few years, it is reasonable to assume that, as deepfake technology improves, we will reap a correspondingly diminished return on our abilities to identify it solely through unrealistic facial expressions and other telltale infelicities. Such techniques thus should not preclude deploying a battery of other adaptive technological, legal, and enforcement tools for preventing, detecting, flagging, and minimizing the societal impact of malicious deepfakes, efforts which, at the time of this writing, continue both to stymie policymakers and to trouble free speech advocates around the globe.<sup>44</sup>

Still, there is a case to be made that not only are the affects and bodily gestures I have studied here even more crucial in our “disinformation age,” but also that we are becoming less adept at reading them. The ubiquity of smartphones, video conferencing and virtual meeting platforms, and on-demand streaming media may be dulling our instinctual command of interpreting affective cues, particularly when coupled with pandemic-era phenomena like social distancing and isolation. Forms of communication like email and text messaging are infamous for provoking misunderstandings through the absence of such non-verbal cues of self-presentation as tone, mien, and body language, and emojis can do only limited justice to the complexity of our emotional states. This is not the place to rehearse familiar claims about the widespread harm being wrought by handheld devices, virtual reality headsets, the metaverse, and similar bugbears of “attention harvesting.”<sup>45</sup> But if these technological breakthroughs are in fact wearing away at our instinctive faculties of emotional expression, discernment, and interpretation, then they are doing so precisely when such faculties ought to be enlisted for combatting the disinformational forces that are holding the democratic public sphere hostage to a “post-truth” “Infocalypse.”<sup>46</sup> These include not just the cyber warfare specialists and online trolls who fabricate digital forgeries but the more covert, and perhaps more insidious, tactics of social media companies, whose profit-driven algorithms and commodification of our personal data create echo chambers and information silos that reinforce existing, and oftentimes erroneous, views. This “age of surveillance capitalism” has been defined in part as “[a] movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty,”<sup>47</sup> all while “profits end up serving as a stand-in, or proxy, for truth.”<sup>48</sup>

As for how to resist these forces, I concur with other scholars who have argued that it is precisely an engagement with fiction that hones critical readers capable of distinguishing it from fact, such that early modern drama, as a kind of *pharmakon*, might offer at once a perilous simulacrum and the palliative balm of critical discernment. Castillo and Egginton have established convincingly that reading fictional literature can instill a powerful “reality literacy.”<sup>49</sup> Barbara Fuchs, for her part, has recently proposed that the Spanish

picaresque and other “knowing fictions” can continue to play a key role in developing “the mode of critical reading that is essential if we are to discern which texts or voices we can trust, and on what we can or cannot trust them.”<sup>50</sup> If these assessments are valid, then the theatrical obsessions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain might also have initiated what I would call a critical spectatorship, prompting playgoers to grapple with the prospect of visual and auditory artifice, to recognize the tenuous threshold between sincerity and deception, to confront the reality that seemingly genuine emotional gestures could be credibly feigned, and thus to sharpen their abilities for spotting imposture. In this way, it was the very staging of what I have termed the deepfakes of actorly performance that girded early moderns against the growing threats of theatrical “truth,” allowing us to imagine an early modern public not so much beset by performative artifice as empowered by it. We would be wise to take a page from their playbook.

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## Notes

1. birbfakes, "Jennifer Lawrence-Buscemi on Her Favorite Housewives [Deepfake]," YouTube video, 1:16, January 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1jng79a5xc>.
2. Ctrl Shift Face, "Spot On AI Pacino Impression by Bill Hader [Deepfake]," YouTube video, 3:56, May 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-jl-JaRWG7s>.
3. To mention merely one example, a report by the US Department of Homeland Security lumps the videos of Lawrence and Hader together with others that pose a much more serious menace to democracy and public trust. United States Department of Homeland Security, "Increasing Threat of DeepFake Identities," November 28, 2022, [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/increasing\\_threats\\_of\\_deepfake\\_identities\\_0.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/increasing_threats_of_deepfake_identities_0.pdf).
4. In the words of Emilio Orozco Díaz, in the Baroque "todos actúan como actores, con la conciencia de su vestir, de sus movimientos y de sus gestos; sintiéndose contemplados" (everyone acts like actors, with the consciousness of their dress, their movements, and their gestures, [always] feeling watched). Orozco Díaz, *El teatro y teatralidad del barroco* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1969), 26.
5. David R. Castillo and William Egginton, *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1.

6. Egginton's books, *How the World Became a Stage* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003) and *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)Baroque Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), offer the most complete philosophical analysis of these and related metatheatrical concepts in the Spanish Baroque.
7. John Jeffries Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 29–30.
8. Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 70.
9. José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, trans. Terry Cochran (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 225–47. On the several studies that have sought to rebut Maravall's central theses, see Laura R. Bass, "Introduction: The *Comedia* and Cultural Control: The Legacy of José Antonio Maravall," *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 65, no. 1 (2013): 1–13.
10. Martin, *Myths*, 32–38.
11. Luis F. Avilés, "The Prison-House of Media: Emancipating the Spectator," in *A Polemical Companion to "Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media"*, ed. Bradley J. Nelson and Julio Baena, *Hispanic Issues Online Debates* no. 8 (2017): 22–28, provides a brief theoretical reflection on other avenues by which early modern subjects might manage to escape this medial system of subjugation.
12. Castillo and Egginton, *Medialogies*, 11.
13. Chaim Gartenberg, "Star Wars Has a Luke Skywalker Problem," *The Verge*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/2022/2/2/22914062/the-book-of-boba-fett-star-wars-luke-skywalker-aging-cgi>.
14. Martin Anderson, "Why Deepfakes Cannot Currently Convey Subtlety of Emotion," *Unite.AI*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.unite.ai/why-deepfakes-cannot-currently-convey-subtlety-of-emotion/>.
15. For more on early modern Spanish acting, see Evangelina Rodríguez Cuadros, *El libro vivo que es el teatro: Canon, actor y palabra en el Siglo de Oro* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2012), and *La técnica del actor español en el Barroco: Hipótesis y documentos* (Madrid: Castalia, 1998).
16. Alonso López Pinciano, *Philosophia antigua poética*, ed. Alfredo Carballo Pinciano (Madrid: CSIC, 1973), III: 282. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted, and I have also modernized the orthography of citations.
17. Lope de Vega, *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias*, ed. Enrique García Santo-Tomás, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Cátedra, 2009), 146, vv. 275–76.

18. Miguel de Cervantes, *Comedias y tragedias*, ed. Luis Gómez Canseco (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2015), 897, v. 2911.
19. Lópe de Pinciano, *Philosophia antigua poética*, III: 284.
20. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 14.
21. Lope, qtd. in José María Ruano de la Haza, *La puesta en escena en los teatros comerciales del Siglo de Oro* (Madrid: Castalia, 2000), 298.
22. Lope, *Arte nuevo*, 149, vv. 331–37.
23. Anonymous, *Genealogía, origen y noticias de los comediantes de España*, ed. Norman D. Shergold and John E. Varey (London: Tamesis, 1985), 238; 499.
24. Lope de Vega, *Cartas (1604–1633)*, ed. Antonio Carreño (Madrid: Cátedra, 2018), 291.
25. Juan Caramuel, “Epístola XXI (*Primus calamus*),” ed. Pedro Conde Parrado, in *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias. Edición crítica y anotada. Fuentes y ecos latinos*, ed. Felipe B. Pedraza Jiménez and Pedro Conde Parrado (Cuenca: Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2016), 824–25.
26. Hortensio Félix Paravicino, qtd. in Agustín de la Granja, “Los actores del siglo XVII ante *La vida es sueño*: De la técnica de la turbación a la práctica de la suspensión,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 77, no. 1 (2000): 153.
27. Ignatius of Loyola, qtd. in William A. Christian, “Provoked Religious Weeping in Early Modern Spain,” in *Religion and Emotion: Approaches and Interpretations*, ed. John Corrigan (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 44.
28. James S. Amelang, “La viuda alegre: Miedo y luto en el llanto ritual,” in *Accidentes del alma: Las emociones en la Edad Moderna*, ed. María Tausiet and James S. Amelang (Madrid: Abada, 2009), 203–26; and Francisco Santos, *Las tarascas de Madrid, y tribunal espantoso* (Valencia: Francisco Antonio de Burgos, 1694).
29. Cervantes, *Poesías*, ed. Adrián J. Sáez (Madrid: Cátedra, 2016), 203–04.
30. Lupercio Leonardo de Argensola, *Memorial sobre la representación de comedias*, qtd. in Emilio Cotarelo y Mori, *Bibliografía de las controversias sobre la licitud del teatro en España*, ed. José Luis Suárez García (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1997), 67b.
31. Ignacio Camargo, *Discurso theológico sobre los theatros y comedias*, qtd. in Cotarelo, *Bibliografía*, 127b.

32. Another, more unfortunate parallel with modern deepfakes is that much of this scandalization targeted women, as is the case today with the rampant manufacture of deepfake pornography. See Travis L. Wagner and Ashley Blewer, “‘The World Is No Longer Real’: Deepfakes, Gender, and the Challenges of AI-Altered Video,” *Open Information Science* no. 3 (2019): 32–46.
33. Juan Pérez de Montalbán, *Primero tomo de las comedias del doctor Juan Pérez de Montalbán, clérigo presbítero, notario del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición, y natural de Madrid* (Madrid: Imprenta del Reyno, 1635), n. pag.
34. Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. Francisco Rico et al. (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg/Círculo de Lectores/Centro para la Edición de los Clásicos Españoles, 2004), I, 48:607.
35. Paul Michael Johnson, “Feeling Certainty, Performing Sincerity: The Emotional Hermeneutics of Truth in Inquisitorial and Theatrical Practice,” in *The Quest for Certainty in Early Modern Europe: From Inquisition to Inquiry, 1550–1700*, ed. Barbara Fuchs and Mercedes García-Arenal (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 50–79, and “‘Muchas y muy verdaderas señales’: The Theatrics of Truth and Sincerity of Fiction in *La Galatea*,” in *Drawing the Curtain: Cervantes’s Theatrical Revelations*, ed. Esther Fernández and Adrienne L. Martín (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 277–305.
36. Cervantes, *La Galatea*, ed. Francisco López Estrada and María Teresa López García-Berdoy, 3rd ed. (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006), 4:394.
37. Esther Fernández and Adrienne L. Martín, “Introduction: The Poetics of the Imagined Stage,” in *Drawing the Curtain: Cervantes’s Theatrical Revelations*, ed. Fernández and Martín (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 3–4.
38. Johnson, “Feeling Certainty,” 66–67.
39. Avilés, “Los suspiros del *Abencerraje*,” *Hispanic Review* 71, no. 4 (2003): 453–72.
40. Sara Tilghman Nalle, *Mad for God: Bartolomé Sánchez, the Secret Messiah of Cardenete* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 106–7.
41. Melissa Heikkilä, “Here’s How Microsoft Could Use ChatGPT,” *MIT Technology Review*, January 17, 2023, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/01/17/1067014/heres-how-microsoft-could-use-chatgpt/>.
42. I want to acknowledge that some neurodiverse individuals, such as those diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, may exhibit difficulties in perceiving facial expressions. Rather than promote a normative or ableist narrative, what I want to stress is that everyone’s ability to discern the sincerity of emotional gestures is also necessarily varied and fluid.

43. A recent quantitative experiment arrives at a similar conclusion: Juan-Miguel López-Gil, Rosa Gil, and Roberto García, “Do Deepfakes Adequately Display Emotions?: A Study on Deepfake Facial Emotion Expression,” *Computational Intelligence and Neuroscience* (2022): 1–12. Others have suggested that emotional cues might nonetheless underpin a deep-learning network for detecting deepfakes; see Trisha Mittal et al., “Emotions Don’t Lie: An Audio-Visual Deepfake Detection Method Using Affective Cues,” *MM ’20: Proceedings of the 28th ACM International Conference on Multimedia* (October 2020): 2823–32; and Brian Hosler et al., “Do Deepfakes Feel Emotions?: A Semantic Approach to Detecting Deepfakes Via Emotional Inconsistencies,” *2021 IEEE/CVF Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition Workshops (CVPRW)* (2021): 1013–22.
44. Tiffany Hsu, “As Deepfakes Flourish, Countries Struggle with Response,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/22/business/media/deepfake-regulation-difficulty.html>.
45. Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Vintage, 2017).
46. Nina Schick, *Deepfakes: The Coming Infocalypse* (New York: Twelve, 2020), 9–10; Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), offers a more general overview.
47. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), vi.
48. Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York: Broadway Books, 2017), 12.
49. Castillo and Egginton, *Medialogies*, 221, 225. See also the authors’ more recent titles: Castillo, *Un-deceptions: Cervantine Strategies for the Disinformation Age* (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2021); and Castillo and Egginton, *What Would Cervantes Do?: Navigating Post-Truth with Spanish Baroque Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022).
50. Barbara Fuchs, *Knowing Fictions: Picaresque Reading in the Early Modern Hispanic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 138.

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