



“I’ve just seen a face”: The Beatles’ Faces as Aesthetic and Cultural Objects

Dario Martinelli¹

Accepted: 4 March 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract

The article stems from the acknowledgment of the popularity of The Beatles’ faces within popular music and popular culture altogether. Unlike some contemporary and successive male rockstars, the band focused their aesthetic appeal entirely on the faces (and on clothing), omitting other body parts, and therefore keeping astray from a “sex symbol” status in a conventional, eroticized sense. The article analyses the cultural role of The Beatles’ faces in terms of aesthetic features (the face as a whole as well as face parts), face expressions (display of emotions such as anger, sadness and others), face performances (movements/activities of the face), and extensions/prostheses (glasses, makeup...). These parameters are applied to the chronological development of the face looks adopted by The Beatles during their activity and to the case study of those album covers featuring face close-ups of the band. Additional notes are presented in the area of face representation within the band’s musical repertoire.

Keywords The Beatles · Faces · Album covers · Popular music · Popular culture

1 Introduction

Regularly appearing in polls/surveys on “most recognizable faces”, “all-time pop icons” (both as a band and as single individuals/faces—particularly Lennon and McCartney)¹, The Beatles are undoubtedly four of the most famous faces in popular culture. Some specific portraits (e.g., the cover for the album *With The Beatles*)² have transcended the direct connection with the band, and have become visual fetishes of popular culture *tout court*, in ways that recall, for example, Andy Warhol’s painting of Marilyn Monroe or Alberto Korda’s “Guerillero Heroico” photo of Che Guevara.

An interesting aspect, within an inquiry like this, lies in the observation of a quasi-anomaly—not a unique, but a rarer occurrence. In their status of rockstars idolized by a wide, but predominantly female audience (at least, in terms of aesthetic adulation), The Beatles are among those few groups who exercised their physical charm by predominantly using their faces. “Beatlemania” is a word that has

been used to identify various forms of adulation, but with a specific reference to erotically-connoted female hysteria, an aspect often discussed also in terms of prelude to the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and first opportunity for women to exhibit their sexuality publicly (Simonelli 2013, pp. 22–23). Excluding obviously songs and performances as such (still the primary reason for the band’s success), it is interesting to notice that, unlike several contemporary male sex symbols (Elvis Presley above all, but also Mick Jagger, Jim Morrison and others), and not counting those who came afterwards, in times when the body exploitation in the star system became a rule, the fans could classify The Beatles as “handsome”, “sexy”, “cute” or else just by looking at their faces. The rest of the body remained, for most of their

¹ E.g., The 150 Greatest Pop Culture Icons (2021), Top 100 greatest pop culture icons (2013), Pop Culture Icons of the 20th Century (2017), and many others.

² To write an article on the visual aspects of such a popular and heavily copyrighted act like The Beatles is an enterprise for either fools or millionaires. Not being the latter, and struggling hard not to be the former, I shall offer two types of illustrations to the reader: whenever possible, I will rely on “public domain” pictures, which will be visible in this very text. When not possible, I will transcribe links from official Beatles websites where the needed pictures are displayed. In this case, a picture of the album *With The Beatles* can be found on The Beatles’ official website, at the link <https://thebeatles.com/beatles>.

✉ Dario Martinelli
dario.martinelli@ktu.lt

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Kaunas University of Technology, Mickeviciaus g. 37, Kaunas, Lithuania

career, a scarcely-accessible element, thereby giving much more exposure to clothes and accessories—another crucial element, as The Beatles have been important fashion leaders, in more than one trend (Hewitt 2011, p. 9). This applies both to the visibility of the body as such—unlike bands like The Rolling Stones or The Who, often inclined to perform with unbuttoned shirts or straight away with nude torsos—and to bodily movements: suffice to mention surnames like “Elvis the Pelvis” or songs like “Moves like Jagger” (by Maroon 5) to realize how bodily movements, exhibited mostly during live performances, were the expression of a decidedly sexualized use of the body.

When it comes to The Beatles, instead, we notice a different kind of sex-appeal, one that, in fact, may also not include the word (and the association to) “sex” at all: “The Beatles’ appeal is positive, not negative. They have even evolved a peculiar sort of sexless appeal: cute and safe” (Frontani 2007, p. 45). Or, perhaps more accurately, a kind of not-just-sexual idiosyncratic appeal: “They are described as ‘safe’ and ‘tough’, ‘choirboys’ and ‘sexy’” (Frontani 2007, p. 48). It may thus not come as a surprise that the liveliest body part, or rather, the *only* lively part, displayed during performances was the head, starting from a rich facial expressivity (especially in Lennon and McCartney’s cases, but also Starr’s and, less evidently, Harrison’s—not by chance “the quiet Beatle”), and up to the group’s most typical movement, during the concerts: the shaking of the head during some melodic/emotive peaks of the songs (e.g., the *oooh’s* and the *aaaww’s* in songs like “From Me To You” or “Can’t Buy Me Love”—in practice, the equivalent of Whitman’s “barbaric yawp”).

To my knowledge, there are only five “official” occurrences in which the media or The Beatles themselves exposed body parts other than face and arms—one being very controversial, and another extremely famous:

- In 1964, a report from the magazine *Life*, during the first American tour, publishes a series of photos of the four in swimming costumes, as they relax in a swimming pool in Miami;
- In 1968, another photo session, this time arranged by the band’s management itself to promote the new album (*The Beatles*, better known as *White Album*), portrays The Beatles in various London locations, in often surreal and humorous poses (the session becomes known as “A mad day out”). In some pictures, Paul McCartney appears shirtless (the full photo session is published in Skellett et al. 2018);
- On the same *White Album*, a collage-art poster assembled by the great pop artist Richard Hamilton is included as freebie in the album’s packaging. In it, both McCartney and Lennon appear entirely naked, their intimate parts being however well covered.

- Still in 1968, intimate parts are *not* covered at all on John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s experimental album *Two Virgins*. On the cover picture, the couple appears in full nude, both frontal (the actual cover³) and rear (back-cover). The shot steers enormous controversy and the album is sold inside a cardboard bag, in which only Lennon and Ono’s faces are visible;
- In 1969 we instead witness the most famous example, but also “the most chaste” of the list. On the cover of the album *Abbey Road*, where the four famously cross the eponymous street, Paul McCartney is walking bare-foot⁴. The detail does not escape the attention of the ever-alerted community of conspirationists, fueling a bizarre theory according to which the bare feet are an indication that McCartney is in fact dead and replaced by a lookalike. This well-known myth is not relevant in the present context: briefly, the whole cover was interpreted as a sort of funeral rite for McCartney and the bare feet were understood as a metaphor of the burial (since a few cultures bury the dead without shoes).

By contrast, the faces are always the primary focus of The Beatles’ public image, and the main vehicle of promotion (and thus remain also after the breakup), along only with representations of the four in the act of playing their instruments. For instance, from a strictly photographic point of view, one may notice how no less than six out of thirteen officially released albums (counting also *Magical Mystery Tour*, originally an EP, but an LP in all respects after the American release) feature close-ups of the band’s faces, against five showing them in full figure, and, of the remaining two, one (the *White Album*, with an entirely white cover) featuring an inner sleeve with four close-ups, and another, *Please Please Me*, displaying a low angle of the band overlooking from a staircase, in which—once more—the faces are the visible body parts⁵.

Intriguing is also the crystallization of some somatic traits in non-photographic representations of a more or less iconic type (this time, “iconic” is meant in the purely semi-otic sense). Traits such as the “mop top” hairstyles, Ringo Starr’s big nose, John Lennon’s glasses, Paul McCartney’s asymmetric eyes, and several others, are often isolated from the rest and manage, alone, to become visual synecdoches of the whole faces. The cartoon TV series broadcasted by

³ The picture is available on John Lennon’s official website, at the link <http://www.johnlennon.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Unfinished-Music-No.-1.-Two-Virgins-original-album-cover-min.jpg>.

⁴ The picture is available on The Beatles’ official website, at the link <https://thebeatles.com/abbey-road>.

⁵ A full gallery of the official albums (including some collections released after the band’s breakup) can be found on The Beatles’ official website, at <https://thebeatles.com/albums>.



Fig. 1 A knitwork by Audronė Gedžiūtė, with faceless yet perfectly recognizable Beatles

ABC between 1965 and 1969 is a perfect example: in it, we see Starr's big nose as the focus of an inevitably clownesque/JerryLewisesque mask, McCartney's asymmetry as an opportunity to depict a vaguely melancholic face (perhaps in line with McCartney's status as the romantic balladeer of the band), etc. More to the point, it is possible to recognize The Beatles' faces even when there are no faces at all, but just hair, as in the remarkable knitted work inspired by the *Sgt. Pepper*-era mustached look in Fig. 1 (the fans will also notice that each Beatle was assigned the color corresponding to the uniforms worn for the album cover).

What is remarkable in the latter example, and a plain confirmation of the iconic status of those traits within popular culture, is that the knitted work deliberately omits to reproduce each and all of what Wiskott et al. (1997) have defined "facial landmarks", that is, the primary traits employed by human beings to recognize a face (eye corners, mouth corners, eyebrow corners and nostril corners), at least according to the method discussed in that paper, called Elastic Bunch Graph Matching (EBGM). In other words, a Beatle face deprived of the key points to recognize it *remains* unmistakably a Beatle face. With very few exceptions (once more, Elvis Presley comes to mind), it is difficult to imagine other faces so easily and "deceptively" identifiable within popular music.

To conclude these introductory remarks, and almost as a disclaimer, it may be worth specifying the exploratory nature of this essay. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been yet a systematic academic study of The Beatles faces, so a decision was taken here to discuss (some of) the possible directions that such a study can take, not with the purpose of creating a consistent, systematized analysis, but specifically to display this heterogeneity. Exactly like an explorative journey into an uncharted territory, the first and inevitable goal must be to inventory the space in a rational manner, with a fair description of the characteristics and the potentials of each spot, but *before* digging the

soil, constructing buildings and inhabiting the land. This is the spirit of this article, and therefore the attitude kindly requested to the readers.

2 Analytical Tools

How to analyze The Beatles' faces? Within the economy and the limits of the present essay, I find it useful to emphasize at least five parameters:

- (1) Overall aesthetic feature/s: here, we place categories such as beauty-ugliness (and everything in between), shape, proportions, etc. In The Beatles' case, it must be underlined how each of them was considered very attractive by the female public, for different reasons. Those more strictly related to the topics of this essay apply to Paul McCartney, nicknamed "the cute Beatle"—something that (as we have mentioned) could only be associated to the face, not being other body parts particularly exposed.
- (2) Specific aesthetic features: in this case, we refer to single features of particular relevance, which affect the whole perception of the face: eyes, mouth, nose, dimples, beard and so forth. Just as Mick Jagger has become characterized by his lips or David Bowie by his anisocoria, The Beatles were first and foremost identified by their legendary "mop top" hairstyle—a sheer emblem of the cultural revolution that took place in the 1960s, due especially to their then-unusual length, quickly elected as symbol of the youth's rebellion against the conservative authority of the adults (Hewitt 2011, pp. 158–191). Within individual members, one cannot certainly miss the size of Ringo Starr's nose, something that certainly made him the least conventionally-attractive of the four (which still implied tons of female admirers, though). Nicknamed "the funny Beatle", Starr was not necessarily the "funniest" in a literal sense (all four members displayed a remarkable sense of humor, but if one had to choose, Lennon would probably earn the title of the Beatle with the sharpest and most hilarious wit), but it was rather his nose-centered face to confer him a slight grotesque nuance, making him "funny" in a more metaphorical sense.
- (3) Face expressions: here, we can place items like smiles, cries, grins and any other emotional display. For example, George Harrison, "the quiet Beatle", owed his nickname to his reflexive, introvert attitude, particularly on stage—something he would highlight with a vaguely frowning facial expression. Considered the other handsome one of the band, he would rather exercise his charm in a "brooding hunk" sort of mode, as in that silent loner we notice at parties looking charmingly

troubled (in diametral opposition with McCartney's repeated smiles, winks and thumbs up sign).

- (4) Face performances: in this case, we do not focus on "expressions" but rather "movements" of the face or single parts, aimed, too, at emotional representations, but in a less basic and often more circumstantial way. Examples are some tics, winks, grimaces, and so on. Completing the catalogue of nicknames, it is now John Lennon, "the witty Beatle"⁶, who emerges here. The nickname, more than anything, would refer to his more extrovert and sardonic humor, to a certain intellectual attitude, and most of all to his status as band's leader in the early years (before the shift towards McCartney around 1966). At the same time, though, Lennon was also the most inclined of the four to "make faces", show the crooked eyes and the likes—particularly during live performances and other public appearances. That "witty" character had partly to do with this.
- (5) Extensions and prostheses: concluding, it also makes sense to refer to objects and features artificially added. Glasses, hats, makeup, tattoos, piercing and else belong to this category. Here, we cannot avoid referring to one of the most iconic objects of The Beatles' mythography: the small round glasses that Lennon wore from 1967 onwards up to his premature death (save the last couple of years, when he turned to a bigger frame). Such glasses, second only to the mop top, are arguably the most important facial characteristic that people tend to associate to the band. Wearing them gives an immediate Beatlesque feel (something that Beatles imitators like Oasis knew very well—see Liam Gallagher in the video for their hit "Wanderwall").

3 Diachronic Development

A first application of these parameters may occur in relation to the chronological evolution of the faces during the eight years of the band's career, from the single "Love Me Do" (1962) to the breakup in 1970 (we thus exclude, in this essay the pre-fame and we shall just mention the solo years in a generic way). It is a vertiginous evolution, much like any other aspect of such career, particularly from 1966 onwards. Adams (2016) and Lewis (2019) are two excellent iconographic sources covering the whole period, however on some occasion I will indicate additional sources specialized in specific phases. Excluding very temporary changes, and focusing only on the official mediatic exposures of the band (record covers, audiovisual material, and official photo

sessions), the facial look of the Fab Four went through at least the following stages.

3.1 1962–1964

From the release of the single "Love Me Do" to that of the album *A Hard Day's Night*. The Beatles are here the perfect incarnation of the "four-headed monster" nickname famously given by Mick Jagger. Dressed identically both on stage and in life, with ties and collarless suits (initially designed by Pierre Cardin and then developed by other fashion designers as well), the four musicians exhibit the same facial look, making them almost interchangeable: neatly shaved, with the first "mop top" model, long by those years' standards but relatively short in comparison to what they will sport eventually. Lennon, heavily short-sighted since his early age, does not wear glasses publicly (photos shot during the recording sessions, instead, show him wearing a thick black frame, in *Harry Palmer* style).

In most pictures, The Beatles appear either smiling or displaying joyous and inoffensively irreverent expressions. We see them like this, for instance, on the *Please Please Me* and *A Hard Day's Night* covers, the latter consisting of a series of close-ups in which we exactly witness a catalogue of the most typical expressions of this period. The only significant exception is *With The Beatles*, on which we shall elaborate later.

This is the period of the rise to fame, culminating exactly with *A Hard Day's Night*, both album and film and—particularly—with the first American tour, that inaugurates the British Invasion and brings the Beatlemania phenomenon to global levels. Under the wise supervision of their manager Brian Epstein, The Beatles reach world stardom thanks also to this smiling, reassuring attitude, matched with a subtly rebellious one. Adults and establishment are not too happy of those long hairs and occasional "working class" jokes (in 1963, playing in front of members of the Royal Family, Lennon famously asks them not to clap their hands but shake their jewelry instead), but at the same time they also see four clean elegantly-dressed youngsters singing rather innocent love songs. What prevails, within the band, is the eagerness to please, rather than an uncompromising display of their individual identities (Fig. 2). A rich iconographic source for this period is Barrell (2020).

3.2 1964–1966

From *Beatles for Sale* to *Revolver*. The Beatles keep on dressing uniformly during concerts (but often without tie and already in a livelier manner, for instance with a light striped suit matched with a multicolored paisley shirt in the 1966 American tour), but no longer in other situations, including official photo sessions and press conferences. The

⁶ For more about these and other fan labels, categorizations and descriptions of the four band members, a must-read is Brown 2020.



Fig. 2 Smiling, exuberant and uniformly-dressed: The Beatles in early 1964 [photo of public domain]

facial look is similar to the previous stage, except with a longer and less tidy hairstyle. Lennon persists in not wearing glasses, but in 1966, on the back cover of *Revolver* and in the two videos for the single "Paperback Writer" / "Rain", all four sport sunglasses of different shapes and colors. The psychedelic era begins, albeit still in a transitional phase: The Beatles remain inclined to a smiling and ironic public image, but, especially from late 1965, one can notice more reflexive gazes, serious even, and occasionally annoyed.

The albums of these years are *Beatles for Sale* (where the band appear in a natural, non-smiling, pose, with a gaze almost surprised by the shot), *Help!* (a full-body shot of the four in mock-signaling postures and with positive facial expressions), *Rubber Soul* (again: no smiles but positive/relaxed expressions) and finally *Revolver* (where the four now appear as drawings, courtesy of the artist-friend Klaus Voorman, in serious, slightly disquieting expressions).

There is still plenty of smiling and laughing in public appearances, but something has changed: from an inclusive form of joy (phatic smiles and jokes aimed exactly at the public), one can now witness more inside jokes and in general a more exclusive attitude, almost *despite* the public: thanks also to the abundant consumption of marijuana of this period, the band has created a closed circle: at this stage, after having desired it more than anything else, The Beatles regard stardom as a form of oppression and a threat towards their personal and artistic growth, and even safety (especially after the death threat received from the Ku Klux Klan following Lennon's comment that the band has become "more popular than Jesus"). Beatlemania has turned from enjoyable to unbearable, particularly the screaming during the concerts, which the Fab Four see now as an insult to their musicianship. By 1966, they feel like Roland Barthes' wrestler, whose function "is not to win, [but] to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him" (Barthes 1972, p. 16): after the American Tour they decide to quit



Fig. 3 More freely dressed and less eager to please: The Beatles during a press conference in 1965. [Photo details and attribution: *Minnesota Historical Society - Beatles at the Metropolitan Stadium, 1965 From the Minnesota Historical Society Collections. 015035-24 (Negative Number) N5.25 p19 (Use Copy Locator Number) 015035-24 (Negative Number) - Photo licensed in CC BY-SA 2.0.*]

touring, splitting their parable in two distinctive parts: the "live years" and the "studio years" (Fig. 3). An excellent iconographic source for this period is Marion 2018.

3.3 1967

As the "Summer of Love" kicks in, The Beatles' wardrobe is enriched with multicolor clothes of all sorts and models, including the iconic psychedelic uniforms for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The facial look bows to the hippie fashion and introduces important changes: after a street accident in which he cuts his lips, Paul McCartney grows a moustache to cover the scar. The other three follow, although each chooses a different style: "chevron" for Starr, "painter's brush" for McCartney and "horseshoe" for Lennon and Harrison, with the latter adding a goatee for a short period (we can see him like this in the videos for "Penny Lane" / "Strawberry Fields Forever"). Sideboards, too, start being more visible and pronounced. Hairstyles stay long, but the "mop top" template is no longer strict: hair is still combed on the forehead, but "curtain effects" (with an open line in the middle) start appearing. Finally, after wearing them for script purposes during the filming of 1966 *How I Won the War* (the Richard Lester-directed feature in which he is co-protagonist), Lennon decides to continue wearing glasses also in his life as Beatle. He chooses the film's same frames: the "granny's glasses", small and round (Fig. 4).

During Spring, as the scar disappears, McCartney shaves his moustache, followed by Lennon a little later. Harrison, in turn, removes the goatee. Inspired by the "peace and love" philosophy, The Beatles restore their smiling and inclusive image, but now this attitude is less reassuring for the adults



Fig. 4 Colors, moustache and granny glasses: the psychedelic Beatles of early 1967 [photo of public domain]

(who instead worry for the growing youth emancipation filled with free sex and psychedelic drugs) and is rather aimed at representing the hippie movement: 1967 is, inevitably, the year of “All You Need Is Love”. The Beatles can be seen smiling both on the cover and the inner sleeve of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, while the other 1967 album, *Magical Mystery Tour*, pictures the four in animal costumes and masks, in a pose that again looks positive and joyful.

3.4 1968

The Beatles leave for India, for a period of transcendental meditation. Maybe due to a need of “purity” related to this experience, or just to satisfy the constant need for change, the band’s image turns more sober, with less colorful and patterned clothes and simpler facial looks: Harrison and Starr shave their moustache, and during the first part of the year they are all free of facial hair, if one excludes long sideboards—particularly Lennon’s (see Saltzman 2018 for a rich iconographic source of the Indian trip). Such uniformity is again broken by the restoring of moustache in both Harrison and Starr and Lennon’s significantly longer hair, for the first time down to his shoulders. Starr follows in the same vein, while Harrison joins a year later. In sum, McCartney looks like the one less eager to change, even though his shaving habits become less regular: the inner sleeve for *The White Album*, for instance, shows him in three-day beard mode. He remains the only one, during his tenure with The Beatles, to resist the temptation of growing his hair down to the shoulders: he will however indulge into that for a couple of years during the 1970s. At the end of 1968, the animation movie *Yellow Submarine* is released: it presents a cartoon version

of the band with a combination of facial looks that in fact had never occurred simultaneously: all except McCartney with moustache (as in mid-1967), but Harrison also sports the goatee (as in early 1967, when McCartney *did* have a moustache).

The Beatles of 1968 are showing the first cracks: during the *White Album* recording sessions tensions arise, even leading to Starr’s temporary abandonment, and in general to a growing annoyance towards Lennon’s new girlfriend, Yoko Ono, who begins to show up during the sessions, breaking an intimate camaraderie that had been sacred until then. The *White Album* itself turns out as a compilation of solo efforts, rather than a proper *band* record. The Beatles are growing impatient to leave the nest and live their lives in their own terms: the feeling is well reflected by the album’s inner sleeve, in which we have four separate portraits, instead of a single group picture. The expressions are serious, but again not in the dark sense of the term—Starr even displays a draft of a smile⁷. It certainly needs to be said that, regardless the state of their career or interpersonal relations, The Beatles have always been inclined to a positive and non-aggressive image of themselves. Far from the *maudit* attitude of a Jim Morrison or the tragicity of a Janis Joplin, the Fab Four symbolically stayed true to some of their most famous song verses: “it’s gonna be alright”, “take a sad song and make it better”, “take these broken wings and learn to fly”.

3.5 1969

Already in January The Beatles gather to record an album temporarily titled *Get Back*. The sessions are filled with ups and downs and, despite numerous joyous moments (recently underlined by Peter Jackson’s documentary of the same title), they deal a fatal blow to the groups’ stability and harmony. Arguments among band members increase, Harrison temporarily leaves, and particularly Lennon and Harrison start planning their solo careers. However, more than anything, there are important financial differences. A new manager of dubious reputation, Allen Klein, is hired against McCartney’s will, creating a 3 versus 1 situation that had never occurred before. During this period the band often appears in simple, post-hippie and neo-Americana clothes: jeans, canvas shoes and one-color shirts. The facial looks are identical to what exhibited in late 1968, with the exception of Paul McCartney, now sporting a beard, shaved in the occasion of his wedding in March, and then appearing again

⁷ A picture of the *White Album*’s inner sleeve can be found at The Beatles’ official web store, at the link <https://dvnvgxhycwzf.cloudfront.net/media/SharedImage/imageFull/.fLNgIwXW/SharedImage-84610.jpg?t=5250c46aa9c4970effae>.

afterwards (see Harris 2021 for a rich iconographic source of the *Get Back* sessions).

After January, the other three grow a beard as well (especially long, "hipster" ones in Harrison and Lennon's cases), exactly when McCartney gets rid of his own, almost as to underline his dissonance towards the rest of the band. It is with this look that the band shoots the last photo session⁸ and the most famous and influential cover picture: an orderly crossing of a street called Abbey Road, where their recording studios are, and after which the album will be titled.

There are fewer public appearances during the year, and, besides records and videos, they are limited to press interviews. On the contrary, outside the band's *umwelt*, we find a very active Lennon, starting with his highly-publicized wedding with Yoko Ono that culminates with the so-called "bed-in", a whole week spent in bed to campaign for pacifism. The Lennon of this phase is very eclectic, serious and joyful, calm and infuriated, silent and talkative—the whole repertoire. Both him and McCartney get married in March, just one week from one another. McCartney, who marries Linda Eastman for what turns out to be one of the most enduring marriages in rock history (interrupted only by her cancer and premature departure), show up at the wedding impeccably shaved, combed and smiling—a mile away from his *Get Back* scruffy image.

3.6 1970

The band, already inactive for a few months, officially splits in April. During the same month, after dozens of second thoughts, the *Get Back* project is released as an album, under the title *Let It Be*. The cover shows again four separated close-up portraits, faithfully reflecting the status of the group, although the pictures date back to January 1969, the time of the recording sessions. All four release solo projects, around the same time, and it is thanks to those that we get an updated idea of their facial looks. Starr and Harrison are a longer-haired version of their 1969 selves, McCartney is again bearded, but it is Lennon who exhibits the most radical change: once more aiming at attracting attention on his pacifist campaigns, he and Ono decide to cut their hair to an almost-military length⁹. It is like this that they appear on the video for the solo song "Instant Karma". In a way, the new haircut epitomizes the end of an era: always typified by their "mop tops" and by long hair in general, The Beatles literally "cut" with their past, through their founder and first leader.

⁸ Various pictures of that session can be found at The Beatles' official webpage, at the link <https://thebeatles.com/last-photo-session-tittenhurst-park-1969>.

⁹ A picture of Lennon and Ono's short haircut can be found at John Lennon's official website, at the link <http://www.johnlennon.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/LEAD-IMAGE-22216-v1a-1.jpg>.

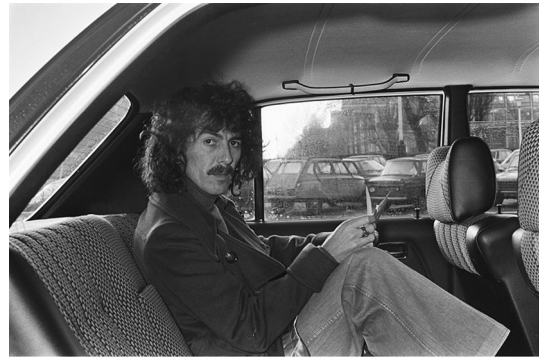


Fig. 5 George Harrison in 1977: the only period a Beatle ever went curly [photo of public domain]

3.7 The solo years

Concluding, a few notes on the solo careers, just to emphasize the most significant changes, and without entering into year-after-year details. Lennon partly renounces his "Granny glasses" in favor of a bigger frame, towards the end of the 1970s. His hair is longer or shorter depending on the period, but as the New Wave fashion kicks in, he decidedly opts for a shorter haircut, and thus we see him on the cover of his last album, *Double Fantasy*, released two months before his assassination. For the occasion, he also removes the glasses altogether, ending up looking a bit like the young Teddy Boy he had been before fame.

McCartney, as mentioned, sports very long hair until the mid-1970s, and then, like Lennon, alternates longer and shorter cuts, including very short ones (see the 1985 video for "Spies Like Us"). Besides this and the 1970 beard, we see him with moustache in a couple of occasions, still in the 1970s. Then nothing else: his look remains constant and shaved all of these years, affected only (and not marginally, of course) by wrinkles and other signs of age.

Harrison, with the exception of the early 1980s and—for obvious health reasons—in his last days, when he is treated for cancer, keeps a rather long haircut, with frequent appearances of beard and/or moustache. Perhaps, his most distinctive trait is the permanent wave that he exhibits in the late 1970s, turning him into the first and only curly Beatle (Fig. 5).

Finally, Starr is the one most subject to radical changes. Since the mid-1970s, he has covered his blue eyes with sunglasses, usually, but not only, of the Ray-Ban type. During the same period he starts wearing an earring. Most importantly, in 1976 he goes even further Harrison's permanent wave or Lennon's short haircut: he shaves his hair bald, becoming the uncontested trichological antithesis to the Beatles' myth (we see this look in the video for "You Don't Know Me at All"). In the following years, and until very recently, he settles on a very short haircut and on a neat



Fig. 6 The look that has characterized Ringo Starr in the 21st century: very short hair, sunglasses, an earring and his trademark “peace and love” gesture [photo of public domain]

beard. Like the other surviving Beatle McCartney, Ringo, too, shows obvious signs of ageing (Fig. 6).

4 The Cultural Impact of the Album Covers

As mentioned above, more than half of The Beatles’ album covers feature their faces as main element of attraction. This, besides obvious promotional reasons, is due also to the conventions of the time of using manneristic poses for such releases, while a more distinctive inclination to abstract and in general creativity would occur from the second half of the 1960s onwards, thanks also to the Fab Four themselves. What is important to notice is that nearly all album covers, from *Please Please Me* to *Let It Be*, have exercised a remarkable cultural influence, well beyond the borders of the musical sphere:

Almost without exception, the [Beatles] album covers themselves have been seen as groundbreaking in their visual and aesthetic properties, have been congratulated for their innovative and imaginative designs, have been credited with providing an early impetus for the expansion of the graphic design industry into the imagery of popular music, and have been seen as largely responsible for allowing the connections between art and pop to be made explicit. (Inglis 2001, p. 83)

Naturally, the very first place of this category cannot but be occupied by *Abbey Road*, a cover picture of legendary simplicity, which, thanks also to its low budget and easily reproducible nature, has inspired thousands imitations, parodies and homages, from other musicians (e.g., Red Hot Chili Peppers’ *The Abbey Road E.P.*) to advertising (e.g., an M&M’s commercial); from cartoons (e.g., *The Simpsons*) to TV (e.g., Benny Hill), up to—fatally—internet memes, including a very current COVID-themed one in which Lennon walks in opposite direction and tell the others “I forgot the mask”. Moreover, a photo *à la Abbey Road* is an absolute must for millions of tourists visiting that street.

After *Abbey Road*, the podium is arguably shared by *Sgt. Pepper’s* (particularly the general concept of placing an act

among a group of celebrities, but there have been also specific parodies such as Frank Zappa’s cover for *We’re Only in It for the Money*) and the *White Album* (catalyst for dozens of one-color minimalist covers, such as Metallica’s *Black Album*). After these instances of possibly-unmatched impact, a number of face-centered cover appear. Very influential, indeed, has also been *With The Beatles*, the 1963 album portraying the band in black and white, half-covered by shadows with a strong contrast—and in general one of Beatles’ most iconic pictures in absolute, as we have seen already¹⁰. Once more, we witness here a rather simple idea (courtesy of the great photographer Robert Freeman) with a high degree of reproducibility, which—thanks also to the protagonists’ fame—has become a repeatedly-imitated *topos*, up to the point of replacing real faces with sculptures (as in Utopia’s *Deface the Music*) or rubber masks (as in Genesis’ single “Land of Confusion”). Like the previous cases, the cover for *With The Beatles* had an impact also outside popular music. A recent example is the 2015 album of the Lithuanian chamber ensemble FortVio¹¹.

Intentional mannerism and intrinsic sense of classical beauty aside, the cover presents numerous innovative traits, resulting in being one of the leading examples for the stylistic changes that were about to come later in the decade. There are at least three important elements of modernity in Freeman’s photo. *In primis*, the pose’s architecture, more precisely the space management. In an age, the early 1960s, when bands were either aligned neatly (see the covers for the likes of The Platters or The Shadows), or alternatively in “hierarchical order”, with the lead singer placed more prominently (closer to the camera or at the center of the pose—e.g., see how Ronnie Spector always stands out in The Ronettes’ covers), *With The Beatles* appears pleasantly asymmetric on at least three levels: the 3 + 1 irregular composition, with Starr down right (probably sitting) and the other three on top; the different perspectives, with Lennon being the closest to the camera and McCartney the furthest, providing an almost 3D feel; and finally the inconsistency of the position in relation to the supposed band’s hierarchy. While the leader of the time, Lennon, is the biggest face in the bunch, it is also true that the second-in-command McCartney is the smallest and—most of all—who really stands out (due to his position) is Starr, which at the time is definitely the “fourth” Beatle by importance, being the newcomer and the least-employed lead singer (he famously sang only one song per album). The message, thus, is clear: The Beatles

¹⁰ As already mentioned, a picture of the album *With The Beatles* can be found on The Beatles’ official website, at the link <https://thebeatles.com/beatles>.

¹¹ A picture of the FortVio’s album cover is available at the official website of the BMR recording label, at the link <https://bmr.lt/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Fortvio.jpg>.



Fig. 7 One of countless tourists' photos reproducing the *Abbey Road* cover. Note how the subjects paid attention to wear similar clothes as in the original picture, and of course to remove the shoes when it came to play McCartney's part [photo of public domain]



Fig. 8 The Beatles' "democratic" concert set-up: McCartney, Harrison and Lennon are lined up on the front, and Starr, while behind, stands on a pedestal, being equally visible to the audience. [photo of public domain]

want to be identified as, so to speak, a democratic band, and not by chance they become the first act whose members are all known by name and have each their own fanbase. Even when they perform live, their stage positions reflect a certain equality: the three guitarists are orderly lined up on the front, while the drummer—albeit placed behind—stands on a pedestal, being therefore equally visible (Fig. 7).

In fact, it may exactly be this stage arrangement that may have inspired the second element of modernity, that is: *With The Beatles* is one of the early album covers toying with different "levels of reality" (in Eco's sense—1968, p. 64). The fact that Starr is sitting and the other three are standing may also be understood as a metaphor of their stage postures: Harrison, McCartney and Lennon stand up with their guitars, while Starr sits at the drumkit. Additionally, by their own admission, The Beatles want to get more artsy for this second album cover, creating a more inspiring atmosphere than their first album, where—as mentioned—they are simply smiling from the staircase of the EMI studios building. When planning this artsier approach, the band is first of all inspired by Freeman himself, particularly his previous work with jazz musicians (any jazz lover will remember the legendary picture of John Coltrane playing flute and looking upwards: that was Freeman behind the camera): a pop picture looking like a jazz picture would immediately take a more intellectual edge. Secondly, the band look back to their formative years, particularly their pre-fame work in Hamburg red light district clubs, during which they have befriended the above-mentioned Klaus Voorman and other local artists. Among them, photographer Astrid Kirchherr has exactly developed a style based on high contrast black and white

pictures. It cannot be excluded that, by adopting Freeman's photo for their cover, the band has a sense of relatable "artistic familiarity". Finally, it is the fact itself of being a black and white picture to make that photo a hypertextual object: exactly in the period when color photography is taking over and definitely dominating in pop publicity and promotion, *With The Beatles* stands out as one of the early "stylish retro" items, contributing to launch a trend that would be eventually adopted in numerous iconic rock covers.

Finally, the idea of portraying the four in a serious, quasi-existential, expression, especially when matched with other elements (black and white itself, turtleneck "very-French-intellectual" sweaters, etc.) is in stark contrast with that smiling image we have repeatedly discussed. If *Please Please Me* shows them in that joyous "peekaboo! Look who's here" pose from the staircase, and if the following *A Hard Day's Night* (which we are about to discuss) is a catalogue of funny faces, *With The Beatles* constitutes an important exception that almost informs us of their rapidly-progressing songwriting and their "it's not just smiles and fun" personality. Not that *With The Beatles* represents such a compositional development (especially when compared to what will happen in 1965–1966, through "Yesterday", "Eleanor Rigby" and the likes): however, songs like "All My Loving", "It Won't Be Long" or "I Wanna Be Your Man" already demonstrate harmonic and structural inventiveness and, particularly in "All My Loving", a significant growth in performance skills (e.g., McCartney's bassline as a preview of what he will eventually display, and Lennon's frenetic rhythm guitar part—quite a statement to those who consider him the weakest instrumentalist of the band). In sum, *With*

The Beatles is not *Rubber Soul* or *Revolver*, but it certainly is a transitional album in the noblest sense of the expression (Fig. 8).

In addition to all this, the seriousness of those gazes stands again in opposition to the conventions of those days, much more eager to show smiling faces, almost as if the band members were rather getting married than posing for an album (what on Earth is so joyful in a wedding shall be discussed on another occasion). *With The Beatles* is far from being the first “non smiling” album cover, of course, but it is released in a period when this type of pose is still rare, and—thanks to the band’s status as crucial trendsetters of the decade—it contributes to the creation of a new visual *topos* that will become very popular in the late 1960s, and an absolute rule from the 1970s onwards, so much that smiling poses will be seen either as very uncool or as material for Christian Pop (which is more or less the same thing).

Right after *With The Beatles*, in terms of cultural impact, we can place three covers that, at lyrical-musical level, represent even more important steps—in chronological order: *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964), *Rubber Soul* (1965) and *Revolver* (1966). All of them are face-centered pictures, even though in a radically different way: *A Hard Day’s Night*, as mentioned, is the last album of the “ever-smiling Beatles” phase, plus, importantly, is the record accompanying the eponymous Lester-directed film, often indicated as the actual manifesto of Beatlemania. Here, The Beatles are not quite interpreting “themselves”, but rather the mythology of themselves: they are the “four-headed monster” who are together 24/7, incessantly joking, singing catchy and enthusiastic songs, running from the fans and seemingly having no bigger problems than managing their fame and elaborating the next prank. The album cover¹² reflects exactly this: twenty black and white closeups (five for each Beatle), in which every member displays faces and grimaces that summarize that mythology. I would not be surprised if the idea for the cover came after a particular sequence of the movie (which we see after ca. half an hour from the beginning) in which George Harrison, repeatedly photographed by journalists, changes expression at every shot.

Once more, we are dealing here with a widely-imitated and influential cover, which, incidentally, seems to be the favorite choice of those musicians who decide to release a tribute album to the Fab Four (*Claudine Longet Sings The Beatles; John Pizzarelli Meets The Beatles*, etc.), second only to *Abbey Road*. At the same time we can witness homages/parodies from bands that are in one way or another connected to The Beatles (the “rivals” Rolling Stones on

Some Girls, the so-called “female Beatles” Bangles on *Different Light*, the 1960s-influenced Jacob’s Trouble on *Door into Summer*, etc.). Finally, the cultural impact of this cover transcends the musical boundaries and proceeds to inform other areas of pop culture (e.g., the film poster for Stephen Frears’s *High Fidelity*).

Similar observations can be made for *Rubber Soul*, in terms of impact: we find explicit homages and parodies (Morpho’s *Mopho*, Superdrag’s *Senorita*, etc.) as well as attempts to adopt a similar “mood” (Guess Who’s *These Eyes & More: The Best of the Guess Who*, Tangerine Dream’s *Kaleidoscope*, etc.). What such “mood” consists of is soon clarified: Robert Freeman (again author of the cover, and frequent photographer of the band, as beautifully documented in Freeman 2003) takes a few shots in the garden of Lennon’s house, and selects one particular pose to submit to the band’s approval, printing the negative on an LP-sized cardboard square. However, during the print, the cardboard slightly bends, giving the image a stretched, wavy quality, similar to what we now see in the released cover. Always interested in the aesthetic potential of accidents (few months earlier they had left an accidental feedback at the front of their song “I Feel Fine”—not to mention the abundant use of error aesthetics in their later years), The Beatles find the result perfectly coherent with the album title, which indeed refers to a soft, flexible material like rubber. The diagonal orientation of the photo and of course the famous orange early-psychedelic lettering of the title completes the job, giving an unmistakably “rubbery” quality to the artwork¹³. It is thus the idea to offer a surrealist recognizable-but-distorted portrait (a bit like Dalí’s melting clocks) that sets the tones for that “mood” we witness in many of those covers inspired by *Rubber Soul*.

Unlike *With The Beatles*, which only partly reflects the state of the art of the band’s songwriting in the period, *Rubber Soul* is the first Beatles’ cover to be perfectly coherent with their music: this time, there are no doubts that such an artsy and original cover corresponds to an artsy and original set of songs. This is the album featuring “Norwegian Wood”, “Michelle”, “Drive My Car”, “Nowhere Man”... There are more varied themes than just simple, direct love songs; unusual sounds like sitar or fuzz bass; the band’s diverse personalities emerge more clearly, and so forth, up to unanimously becoming one of rock’s most important albums. This is all mirrored by four faces joined together by a pose (and thus, by the intention to still be a compact unit), but at the same time no longer willing to be the four-headed monster: “I liked the way we got our faces to be longer on the album cover. We lost the ‘little innocents’ tag,

¹² A picture of the album *A Hard Day’s Night* can be found on The Beatles’ official website, at the link <https://thebeatles.com/hard-days-night-0>.

¹³ A picture of the album *Rubber Soul* is available on The Beatles’ official website, at the link <https://thebeatles.com/rubber-soul>.

the naivety, and *Rubber Soul* was the first one where we were fully-fledged potheads" (George Harrison, quoted in Guedson et al. 2013, p. 272).

Apparently, Freeman does not ask the band to take a single pose (e.g., all looking at the camera), but lets them be quite spontaneous, so what we see is four natural expressions, serious but not dark (with a vague smile on Lennon's face, but not a "smile for the camera" type), all intent in looking wherever they please: McCartney, Harrison and Starr look towards their right (but not towards the same spot) while Lennon looks at the camera. The shot is taken in low-angle, which gives more authoritativeness to the foursome, and that, too, combined with the diagonal orientation and the distorted printing, adds up to the "rubber" effect.

Less than one year later, *Revolver*, if possible, is an even more meaningful episode in the band's artistic development: to many, this is in fact the actual Beatles' masterpiece, or even the best album in rock history altogether (in competition with another pair by The Beatles themselves, plus other masterpieces like Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde*, Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*, Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, and few others). The Beatles, at this point, have accessed in full gear the gates of "art rock" and psychedelia in particular, thanks also to the notorious consumption of LSD. The arrival of a new sound engineer, the talented Geoff Emerick, has brought heavier sounds, adventurous recording techniques, and in general a variety of solutions that is ideal for the constant quest for originality of the band. The double string quartet and the surrealist poetry of "Eleanor Rigby", the homages to Stockhausen and the hard psychedelia of "Tomorrow Never Knows", the Motown sound of "Got to Get You into My Life", the backwards guitars of "I'm Only Sleeping", and so on, arguably make *Revolver* the most complete and daring of all Beatles' albums. It is also the last one released during the "live" period of the band: few months later they will abandon the concert activity forever. Another reason for this choice (besides the mentioned ones) is the fact that the arrangements in *Revolver* are far too complex to be performed by only four people on a stage. Considering that this is a direction that The Beatles have taken for good, it would not make much sense to play live only to reminisce the old repertoire.

All this requires a cover picture that says more than a slightly-distorted image: for *Revolver*, the band wants something even artsier—maybe not even a photograph altogether. Once more, their minds go to the Hamburg days. Klaus Voorman, the old friend who has by now become also a respected musician, is approached by Lennon with a task of designing a cover that would capture the "new Beatles": the revolutionary musicians and the stoned freak-outs. Voorman obliges by taking inspiration from the Art Nouveau artist Aubrey Beardsley (specialized in markedly black and white ink drawings deprived of nuances), and by adding the

increasingly fashionable element of collage art. The result is four drawn portraits with interlacing hairs that envelop a patchwork of old Beatles photos¹⁴, almost as if the "early" Beatles are ejected from the heads of the new ones, by now occupied with totally different thoughts than Beatlemania, cute faces and simple songs. The drawings are essential, almost geometrical (such as the straight line of Lennon's nose), completely black and white, just as Beardsley would have liked, although eyes and lips are richer in grey nuances.

Like in *Rubber Soul*, each face is "minding its own business". McCartney is drawn in profile, Starr in $\frac{3}{4}$ rear and low angle, Lennon and Harrison in full frontal, but the former looks right and the latter breaks the fourth wall. Nobody smiles and—possibly for the first time—nobody seems eager to reassure the viewer. The gazes are pensive in an almost disquieting way: as requested to Voorman, the four minds seem to be somewhere else. The same black and white, in evident antithesis with the super-colorful covers of the psychedelic era, is almost a declaration of authority: yes, we are psychedelic too, but we are in our own way, and we don't look like anybody else. The Beatles are famously aware of their ability to be one step forward their contemporaries: it should not be overlooked that *Revolver* comes in a period when many peers, visually-wise, are still catching up with *Rubber Soul* (see the Stones' *Aftermath* or Mamas & Papas' *If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears*), or other influential covers from 1965 (such as Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* di Dylan, imitated in Lovin' Spoonful's *Daydream*). Instead, after 1966, *Revolver* too gets its own share of homages and parodies, with the usual sequence of tribute albums (*Black America Sings Lennon & McCartney*, *Mina canta i Beatles...*), covers "in the style of" (Rag Fair's *Air*, Jet's *Get Born...*) and quotations from other media (Cathy Berberian's *Revolution*, even a Dragon Ball poster...).

5 "I've just seen a face": The Sixth Parameter

In addition to the five parameters discussed earlier, there is actually a sixth one, qualitatively different but transversal to the others, that would deserve a separate treatment, and that I will only mention on this occasion, due to the limitations of this essay. That is: the face as a represented item *inside* the Beatles' musical repertoire itself. Not *their* faces, but the faces they sing about. The title of this essay, "I've just seen a face", refers, as many know, to a Lennon-McCartney track from the album *Help!* Albeit not as often as more commercial bands (who pack their love songs with appreciations for eyes and lips in particular), The Beatles have occasionally

¹⁴ A picture of the album *Revolver* is available on The Beatles' official website, at the link <https://thebeatles.com/revolver>.

described their faces or those of other (real or imaginary) characters.

For the purposes of this short paragraph, I shall just propose a couple of reflections, looking forward for a lengthier opportunity. Once more, it is important to restate the exploratory nature of this article. Having this “sixth parameter” included in an analysis of The Beatles’ *real* faces may certainly look a bit out of place. At the same time, if this is (as it seems it is) the first opportunity to academically approach this topic, can we really, in full conscience, omit to at least mention the “raw material” of any possible interpretation of The Beatles’ phenomenon—the songs? Can we really *not* put this aspect on the map? What I suggest, quite simply, is the identification of four sub-groups of interest, within this special sixth parameter, referring to the role that a face (or some specific parts) plays within the narrative/thematic dynamics of given songs. As mentioned, we are discussing here a parameter that is transversal to the other five, thus, evidently, each sub-group is in principle applicable to all the other five. For example, when talking of “face as erotic object”, one may equally refer to general aesthetic questions (the first parameter), single parts (second parameter), expressions (third), performance (fourth) and prostheses/extensions (fifth). In the following list, of course, I will provide specific examples taken from the band’s repertoire:

- (1) The face as erotic object: the most obvious and commercial role of the face in a pop song is the indicator of beauty/charm. Particularly in love songs, one may refer to a face or to single parts (usually eyes or lips, but often also cheeks, hair and others) as main object of erotic desire (“erotic” in a literal sense, not just in the sexual one). Exactly the mentioned “I’ve Just Seen a Face” is an example: in the song, the protagonist falls in love “at first sight”: “I’ve just seen a face, I can’t forget the time or place when we first met, she’s just the girl for me and I want all the world to see we’ve met”. A more famous example is George Harrison’s “Something”, from *Abbey Road*. Here, there is a reference to a facial expression: “Somewhere in her smile she knows, that I don’t need no other lover”. To the band’s credit, we do not find too many songs of this type: there are a few, naturally, but in general their approach to love songs has more to do with the description of feelings, rather than the fetishization of body parts.
- (2) The face as character’s depiction. In this case, we deal with descriptions that are not necessarily affective or emotive, but rather serve the purpose to characterize a person. In “Lovely Rita”, on *Sgt. Pepper’s*, a classic example of McCartney’s Dickensian “fictional song” (see Martinelli 2015, p. 279), we find two passages of this type: “In a cap, she looks much older”, and “give us a wink and make me think of you”. On the same album, there is also “When I’m Sixty-Four”, where the initial identification of the aged character is hair loss: “When I get older, losing my hair”.
- (3) The face as narrative space. The face may also be a place where things happen that contribute to the development of a story. This may occur in either a marginal, as *one of the events* inside a song, or a central way, as a *crucial* or even *turning event*. In the former case we may consider “Here, There and Everywhere”, on *Revolver*, where the protagonist is caressing his girlfriend: “There, running my hand through her hair”. Nothing special here: just a moment of intimacy within the context of a love song. Vice versa, in “Ob-la-di Ob-la-da”, on the *White Album*, we have a sheer *coup de theatre* that turns an apparently-innocent song in a politically-incorrect transvestite affair. In the first strophes of the song, we learn that the character of Desmond falls for Molly, and his first declaration to her is exactly “Girl, I like your face”. The average listener is quickly persuaded that this appreciation is symbolic of falling in love as such, and does not imagine that “liking a face” may represent something else. Instead, what happens afterwards is that Desmond, a seller by profession, is at the market with his sons, while Molly, a singer, is at home doing the makeup before a concert: “Molly stays at home and does her pretty face, and in the evening she’s still singing with the band”. In the last strophe, however, we have a role reversal, but not just in terms of jobs, but actual genders. Molly ends up at the market with the kids, and Desmond becomes a “she”: “Desmond stays at home and does his pretty face, and in the evening *she’s* still singing with the band”. At that point, the refrain turns naughty and sarcastic: “Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da, *life goes on...*”. Life goes on even if mummy has become daddy and daddy has become mummy.
- (4) The face as metaphor. Finally, the face may also be used rhetorically in ways that transcend its denotative level, either through idiomatic expressions or actual poetic constructions. In the former case, one can certainly mention that cauldron of psychedelic images that is “I Am the Walrus”, on *Magical Mystery Tour*. In it, along with other surrealistic images, we find the line “Man, you’ve been a naughty boy, you’ve let your face grow long”. The face is treated like hair (since it *grows* long), but the reference is to the idiomatic expression “to have a long face”, which mean to be sad/depressed. In the latter case, we again have to refer to one of The Beatles’ best set of lyrics, “Eleanor Rigby”, the story of an old lady who lives alone and who, desperate for some social acceptance, pretends to be less sad than how she is in reality. Such condition is expressed through the magnificent line “Waits at the window, wearing a face

that she keeps in a jar by the door". The idea of wearing a fake face (which evidently displays a less melancholic expression) refers to the whole farce that the poor Eleanor has to stage even only when she sits by the window, where indeed she may be seen by a passerby.

6 Conclusions

I shall use the remaining space of this essay to summarize the main issues raised, and also to show the current gaps that would require more elaboration. The essay departed from the acknowledgment of the exceptional popularity of the Beatles' faces within popular culture as a whole, noticing that, unlike some contemporary (and, most of all, successive) male rock icons, the band focused their aesthetic appeal entirely on the faces, omitting other body parts (or body as a whole), and therefore not engaging into "sex symbol-ness" in a traditional sense. Methodologically, the analysis was based on five main parameters: overall aesthetic features (the face as a whole), specific aesthetic features (face parts), face expressions (anger, sadness...), face performances (movements/activities of the face), and extensions/prostheses (glasses, makeup...). These were applied to two main areas of inquiry: the chronological development of the face looks adopted by The Beatles in the course of their activity (1962–1970) and the specific case study of the album covers, in particular *With The Beatles*, *A Hard Day's Night*, *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*, all featuring face close-ups of the band. I then concluded the analysis by introducing a *sui generis* sixth parameter, focused not on the group's faces as such, but on how faces and face parts appear, denotatively and connotatively, in the song repertoire. Exactly the latter is the first of several topics that would need more elaboration in a future research, having been just drafted here.

In addition, the essay has not had the opportunity to deepen several equally, if not more, important aspects. I'll mention at least the following five:

1. The whole audiovisual area, in particular the full-length features and the music videos. The sole example of a video like "Strawberry Fields Forever", with its insisting focus on close-ups and even extreme close-ups of the band's faces, reveal how much more is there to write on this subject.
2. Any artistic interpretation of The Beatles' faces from sources/authors external to the band's official releases. There is a vast area of paintings, sculptures, graphics, etc. in need of attention.
3. A more comprehensive investigation on the mediatic representation of the faces, particularly in newspapers, magazines and new media. With the exception of the

1964 *Life* magazine report (mentioned at the beginning), this part was entirely missed here.

4. An accurate investigation on the band's faces during their solo careers. While certainly less impactful on popular culture than they were as a band, all the four faces have been very present in official and non-official platforms, year after year until nowadays, when the two surviving Beatles, especially McCartney, are still extremely famous and active. Issues such as McCartney's typical "surprised face" (as appearing in album covers like *Red Rose Speedway* or *McCartney II*) or Lennon's various grimaces (best exemplified in the cover for *Walls and Bridges*) are not less interesting than anything happening during the band's tenure.
5. An in-depth analysis of the faces during the actual performances. How they move, how they "interpret" (if they do) the songs or instead how they detach from them and rather focus on the relationship with the audience, etc. This, too, should be done in relation to The Beatles as a band (in their live activity from 1962 to 1966), but also (perhaps mostly) to the solo activities, due to the wider timespan that would allow also comparative reflections based on the changing ages, the different fashions, etc.

Acknowledgement This paper is part of the special issue of *Topoi* "What's so special about faces? Visages at the crossroad between philosophy, semiotics and cognition", edited by Marco Viola and Massimo Leone, which results from a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant Agreement No 819649-FACETS).

References

- Adams T (2016) Looking through you: rare & unseen photographs from the beatles book archive. Omnibus Press, London
- Barrell T (2020) Beatlemania: four photographers on the fab four: photographs by Norman Parkinson, Michael Ward. ACC Art Books, Woodbridge, Terry O'Neill and Derek Bayes
- Barthes R (1972) Mythologies. Hill and Wang, New York
- Brown C (2020) 150 Glimpses of The Beatles. Picador, New York
- Eco U (1968) La struttura assente. Bompiani, Milano
- Freeman R (2003) The beatles: a private view. Big Tent Entertainment, New York
- Frontani M (2007) The beatles: image and the media. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson
- Guedson JM et al (2013) All the songs: the story behind every beatles release. Black Dog & Leventhal, New York
- Harris J (2021) The beatles: get back. Callaway Arts & Entertainment, New York
- Hewitt P (2011) Fab gear: the beatles and fashion. Prestel, Munich
- Inglis I (2001) Nothing you can't see that isn't shown': the album covers of the beatles. *Pop Music* 20/1:83–97
- Lewis G (2019) The beatles in pictures. Ammonite Press, Lewes
- Marion L (2018) The lost beatles photographs: the Bob Bonis Archive, 1964–1966. Dey Street Books, New York

- Martinelli D (2015) Authorship, narrativity and ideology: the case of Lennon-McCartney. In: Maeder C, Reybrouck M (eds) *Music, analysis, experience - new perspectives in musical semiotics*. Leuven University Press, Leuven
- Saltzman P (2018) *The beatles in India*. Insight Editions, San Rafael
- Simonelli D (2013) *Working class heroes: rock music and British Society in the 1960s and 1970s*. Lexington Books, Lanham
- Skellett P et al (2018) *The beatles: Tom Murray's mad day out*. ACC Art Books, Woodbridge
- Wiskott L et al (1997) Face recognition by elastic bunch graph matching. *IEEE Trans Pattern Anal Mach Intell* 19:775–779
- Pop Culture Icons of the 20th Century (2017) Internet Movie Database. <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls062511576/>. Accessed 23 Sep 2021
- The 150 Greatest Pop Culture Icons (2021) The Definitive Dose. <https://definitivedose.com/the-150-greatest-pop-culture-icons/>. Accessed 13 Sep 2021
- Top 100 greatest pop culture icons (2013) Manchester Evening News. <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/whats-on/music/top-100-greatest-pop-culture-1156460>. Accessed 13 Sep 2021

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.