

A perfect model of the great King

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On the relationship between the image of sovereignty and the legitimacy of social order in modern political thought

This article compares rulers' portraits from the 17th and 18th century arguing that they reveal a critical transformation of political thinking. Since the French Revolution, sovereignty is no longer an absolute model of divine authority but has turned into a contingent image of itself. Hence, the dispute about the symbolic form of the social and the adequate representation of the sovereign (the people) has become the very essence of modern democracy. Formerly involved in the constitution of royal power through acts of display and pictorial representation, the visual arts now face the challenge to depict sovereignty in a society where the ultimate place of power is empty.

Introduction

On the 11th of December 1831 John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of the United States, wrote in his diary: «Democracy has no monuments; it strikes no medals; it bears the head of no man upon a coin; its very essence is iconoclastic.» ^[1] Adam's comment on the image of popular sovereignty reflects a modern understanding of political representation which seems to have distanced itself from any form of metaphysical idolatry. But what are the reasons for democracy's alleged aversion against all forms of overbearing imagery? Forty two years prior to Adams diary entry the question about the form of sovereignty and the source of its legitimacy had become a question of life and death in revolutionary France.

The assault on the Bastille on the 14th of July 1789 marked a turning point in recent history, the transcendent foundations of the absolutist social order having crumbled and fallen within a few years. The fierce dispute in the 18th century about the nature of sovereignty was historically unprecedented. The radical upheavals also had a profound impact on the visual arts of that time which, until then, had played an important role in the constitution of royal power (at least in the institutionalised form of the French academy). In particular the portrait of the sovereign can be regarded as a significant document to understand the legitimacy of social order at an extraordinary and momentous point in Western history.

This article focuses on the visual representation of artistic pictures based on the hypothesis that they reflect the decisive shift in political thinking from the era of *absolutist* monarchy to the early forms of modern *democracy*. The portrait of the king, so I will try to show by example of paintings by Hyacinth Rigaud and Charles Le Brun, stands for a form of absolutist sovereignty which assumes the existence of a social order identical with its modes of representation; in contrast, the political dimension of democratic sovereignty emanates from the discrepancy between the model of sovereignty and the image of the sovereign. I will demonstrate this relation with a focus on the work of French painter Jacques-Louis David. My argument is mainly structured around the art-historical interpretation of the work of Charles Le Brun by Amy M. Schmitter [2] and her account of French academic painting as well as T. J. Clark's analysis [3] of David's *The Death of Marat*.

The authors' interpretation can be fruitfully linked to discussions in contemporary political philosophy which revolve around questions of sovereignty, representation and the symbolic order of the social. Being less concerned here with an in-depth formal analysis of singular pictures, my principle objective is to analyse the intrinsic relationship between image making and modern political thinking. In this context the term *modern* is broadly understood as *secular* and refers to a historical period in which the ancient transcendent foundations of social order were called into question. I will start my deliberations with a brief genealogy of the concept of political sovereignty, followed by an interpretation of the portraits of Louis XIV and Jean-Paul Marat as depictions of the sovereign body and will finally connect them to developments in modern political thought.

Supreme authority and the body of the king

In his seminal study *The King's Two Bodies*, medieval historian Ernst Kantorowicz famously describes the far-reaching transformation in the concept of political authority over the course of the Middle Ages. [4] Kantorowicz sets forth how the modern understanding of sovereignty as «supreme authority within a territory» [5] has emerged from a political theology. According to him, the concept of the king's two bodies is rooted in the ecclesiological understanding of the church as the mystical body of Christ. Christ's body consists of a *corpus mysticum* and a *corpus naturale*, a mortal and an immortal body, a body personal and corporate, individual and collective. Analogous to this theological-political understanding of the body of Christ, which initiates the Roman Catholic Church through the sacrament of the Eucharist, the earthly king was attributed two bodies as well: a *body natural* which is mortal and a *body politic* which outlives the king's physical existence. [6]

Thus the king belongs simultaneously to two different spheres: the first is the sphere of timely presence as attributed to his individual person; the second designates the mystical dignity and justice bestowed to his office and the institution of kingship. His two bodies enabled the monarch to mediate between the profane sphere of society and the transcendent sphere which represented the divine legitimacy of the social order. Only because the mythical body of the king was situated outside of society in the realm of divine glory was it possible that the people could project the imaginary unity of the body politic on his earthly individual existence. In this understanding, the king's body could guarantee the identity of the body politic, since it was his body that represented the mythical community between the kingdom and its subjects.

In summary, the concept of sovereignty relies predominantly on two conditions: first, the holder of sovereignty «is superior to all authorities under its purview» and, second, this supreme authority must be derived «from some mutually acknowledged source of legitimacy» [7]. Starting from the assumption that «state power requires recognition to exist» [8] one has to ask how this recognition, the acknowledgement of legitimacy, is achieved. In the case of Louis XIV, the legitimacy of absolute state power, as represented by the king's body, was derived from a divine mandate while still needing the recognition from his subjects. Amy Schmitter points out that the «pictorial representations» of the king had significant impact on the constitution and execution of absolute state power which was ultimately located in the king's body.

In the following, I will show that the concept of *representation* is essential for understanding the difference between the *model of sovereignty* and the *image of the sovereign* - not only understood as mental concepts but also with respect to their material realisations. My subsequent arguments are based on the assumption that the concept of representation is not simply a means of making visible or making present, but rather a *concept of non-identity*: «Representation is at once the action of putting before one's eyes the quality of being a sign or a person that holds the place of another, an image, a political body, (...)»

[9]

«The portrait of Caesar is Caesar» [10]

In his book *Portrait of the King* French historian and philosopher Louis Marin shows the complex enmeshment of King Louis XIV's absolutist claim to power with its numerous dimensions of artistic representation and proposes the following interpretation of the king's portrait: «The king is only truly king, that is, monarch, in images. They are his *real presence*.» [11] Thus, the portrait of the king, his painted picture, grants us access to a complex network of ideas woven around the nodes of religious beliefs, political power, historical determination and aesthetic experience. As indicated above, the king derived his earthly power from his divine descent which grounded his person in a metaphysical sphere beyond space and time. The king himself, as it were, was a portrait of God, his sovereignty legitimised by divine mandate. It is thus no surprise that in the king's glorious self-understanding Apollo, the Olympian deity of light, truth and the sun, was the preferred role model of le Roi-Soleil.

Whereas the image of Christ constituted a reference to the general theological-political authority and the absolute power of Louis XIV, the image of Apollo served as personal allegory expressing an enhanced understanding of his individual grandeur. Thus, Louis XIV understood the sun «as another version of the king himself.» He described the sun as «the noblest of all stars, (...) which, by virtue of its uniqueness, by the brilliance that surrounds it, by the light it imparts to the other heavenly bodies that seem to pay it court, by its equal and just distribution of the same light to all the various parts of the world, (...) assuredly makes a most vivid and a most beautiful image for a great monarch.» [12] Louis XIV took on the form of the sun not only in a metaphorical way but as a self-aggrandising comparison to God.

In his description of Versailles, André Félibien, the official court historian to Louis XIV, wrote accordingly: «Le Ciel, qui a répandu dans V.M. tant de graces & de tresors, & qui semble avoir entrepris en la formant de faire un chef-d'œuvre de son pouvoir, en donnant à la terre un parfait modele d'un grand Roy; (...)» [13] The king, therefore, is himself the living and omnipotent portrait of God; Louis «is the perfect model of a great king, and he is the unique model only because he is already the portrait of the absolute, the 'unique' copy of the king of kings.» [14] The picture of the king is thus adjudged divine qualities and can be understood as a model, an object of imitation, that is supposed to resemble an 'image' of God.

The portrait of the king thus functioned as an instantiation through which the abstract property of godly power could be exemplified and materialise. The identification with a divine image allowed for the amalgamation of the king's *corpus naturale* with his *corpus mysticum* thus rendering visible the invisible foundation of his sovereignty. Conceived as a model of God, the king's authority was grounded in a transcendent realm which could only be accessed by means of aesthetic experience. Therefore the imagination of the king's godly nature was expressed through the mise-en-scène of his individual person and his claim to supreme authority was conveyed ubiquitously through the aesthetics of spectacle and artistic representation.



Abb: 1 >

Hyacinth Rigaud's huge painting [fig. 1] shows the sixty-three-year-old king in his coronation robes, the royal sword at his side and holding the royal sceptre. On his right-hand side, slightly in the shadow, the crown is presented on a stool. Even though the king is of advanced age, the picture shows a vigorous and healthy-looking middle-aged man with muscular, almost athletic legs, strong enough to support his heavy and precious robes and to carry the insignia of royal power.

The texture of the king's luxurious clothes and the flamboyant drapery in the background are painted in great detail and with a strong sense of accuracy. However, the portrait was anything but realistic. At the time when the portrait was made Louis XIV had already weathered various diseases, his body was gout-ridden and his face ravaged by the loss of teeth. It thus seems plausible in this context to interpret Rigaud's painting as an highly idealistic depiction of the king's natural body expressing an apotheosis of his mystic, immortal body.

From a modern perspective, the distinction between a 'realistic' and 'idealistic' representation of Louis XIV corresponds to what Claude Lefort has described as the «theologico-political formation» [15] reflecting the relationship between the particular and the universal dimension of the sovereign's body. «When the king is blessed and crowned as the Lord's anointed, his power is spiritualized but, although he is the earthly replica of Christ, he differs from his model in that, whilst grace makes him divine, his nature makes him human.» [16] Following Lefort, the king's body does not only represent an incarnation of divine authority which guarantees the identity of the body politic through the unification of the physical with the metaphysical but it also represents «the division between them» [17]. The distinction between the realistic and idealistic dimension of the king's representation can be regarded as a continuation of this division which reveals the paradoxical duality of the king's two bodies. The idealistic depiction of Louis XIV emphasises his absolute claim to power but it shows simultaneously that only through the process of (aesthetic) representation the division between the realistic and idealistic, between the particular and the universal, between the human and the divine, can be overcome.

Thus, Rigaud's portrait symbolises the veneration for the king's physical body which merged with his transcendent body to such an extent that the picture was treated in the same way as the actual king. For Louis XIV who had perfected the aesthetic staging of his daily routines this meant that the portrait served as a substitute for him at the court of Versailles during his absence. The courtiers had to pay the same respect to the king's portrait as to the king himself and it was «an offence known as *lèse-majesté*, or contempt of Majesty, to turn your back on the portrait, (...).» [18] The identification of the king with his visual representations went so far that «some French jurists proposed the right of asylum for the 'holy' statues of the king, and injury done to royal statues and images counted as treason.» [19] As witnessed by such practices, the portrait of the king has become a placeholder of divine glory, a mimetic model of transcendent authority. In this regard, the portrait did not constitute an individual pictorial representation of the king's physical body but rather an allegory of his transcendent body and the institution of monarchy.

The image of the monarch was conceived as allegorical representation of the organic unity of the body politic. An idea which has probably never been summed up in a more poignant way than in Louis XIV's laconic utterance: «L'état, c'est moi.» The organic unity of the body politic was also accomplished through a logic of temporality depicting the king as simultaneously timeless existence and historical figure. According to Kantorowicz: «the king, at least with regard to Time, had obviously 'two natures' - one which was temporal and by which he conformed with the conditions of other men, and another which was perpetual and by which he outlasted and defeated all other beings.» [20] It is the institution of royal power beyond time I will discuss next, and therefore turn towards the work of perhaps the most important artist in 17th century France and at the royal court in Versailles: Charles Le Brun.



Abb: 2 >

In his paintings, Le Brun not only apotheosises the body of the king as belonging to a sphere outside society but also the perpetual body of the king situated beyond time. In Le Brun's allegorical paintings *The Triumph of Alexander / Entry into Babylon* (1661-65) and *The Conquest of the Franche-Comté* (1674) Louis XIV is depicted as the most glorious ruler of all time dominating the course of history. The first painting [fig. 2] shows Louis XIV in the guise of Alexander the Great as he enters the conquered city of Babylon in a golden chariot drawn by two decorated elephants, the royal cloak, his opulent helmet and sceptre referring to the glory of his reign.

The second portrait [fig. 3] depicts the king in similar but somewhat more individualised fashion. Situated in the centre of the picture, Louis XIV is depicted in antique-like robes and as surrounded by emblems of national power (the lion of Spain, the German eagle, etc.) and mythological figures (Hercules, Minerva, Mars). According to Schmitter, the symbolisation of the picture even indicates the precise date of the historical event. [21]

In both paintings narration had an important function for a historical discourse that revolved around the king's body. The depiction of a battle, a mythical scene or the portraiture of the king all served the purpose of creating history, a great narration dedicated to the glorious nation and its absolutist sovereign. Marin describes this as the transformation of the «paradigm 'history' into a *particular narrative*» constructed around the king, which eventually turned into «a universal *model*.»



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Marin elaborates: «Louis XIV makes history, but it is his history that is made in what he does, and at the same time his historian, by writing what he does, writes what must be written.» [22] The same could be said about the visual portrait: the painter paints what must be depicted and, consequently, in Le Brun's portraits history is perceived as a predetermined script staged in the honour of the king.

Tracing back the course of history to the king's body is, from a modern point of view, not only a means of extending and representing royal power but also of curbing the uncertainties inherent in the conditions of history, a covering up of the contingent nature of political representation. However, it is important to stress that the experience of contingency is not a modern phenomenon. Oliver Marchart points out that the discussion of contingency in early European thought was experienced in the form of paradoxes which posed a potential threat to society's normative foundations and were only articulated in mystic, theological or philosophical discourses. [23] Even though contingency was experienced in various ways, it was not generally acknowledged as a social factor and remained «a manoeuvring room within the framework of a solid order.» [24] Accordingly, in absolutist France the representation of the king as incarnation of divine authority was not part of a discourse in which the paradoxes of social foundations should be experienced and the depiction of the king's power had to be cleared of any indications of his temporal and social conditionality.

As shown above, Le Brun encloses precisely this temporal or historical conditionality of Louis' absolute power by means of pictorial representation and depicts his body as eternal certainty dominating the course of history. If the portrait of the king is to be understood as an extension of his body and an instantiation of his divine properties, Marin's following suggestion is plausible: that «the king is only truly king in images» and that it is ultimately not possible «to trace the king otherwise than by retracing him in his representation, by redrawing him from his portrait.» [25] Even though it seems that the king is not «other than his image», Schmitter claims that the various portraits of the king cannot be regarded as a mimetic representation, because «instead of imitating they display the King who is without comparison.» [26] After having characterised the portrait of the king as a model of a transcendent order, an object of imitation as it were, I hesitate to follow Schmitter's argument.

Instead, I would like to raise the question whether mimesis and display are necessarily mutually exclusive forms of depiction. In this context, I am inclined to suggest that in the king's portrait mimetic and displaying elements are inextricably intertwined. The portrait of the king is a mimesis of the abstract concept of transcendent sovereignty which comes into effective existence through forms of depiction enclosing the temporal and social conditionality of the king's authority. Max Black has subdivided the notion of <depiction> into <portray> and <display>, the former referring to an «original scene», the latter referring to a «certain subject» or content. [27] In this regard, the picture of the king is an amalgamation of display and portray in the sense that it depicts a subject (the king's physical body) that is the reference to an imagined original scene (the incarnation of transcendent power).

Materialising the divine properties of the king, the portrait instantiates the transcendent legitimacy of his authority. This is the reason why the king is only truly king in images, as Marin has aptly pointed out. The portrait of the king as a model of God indicates the mimesis of an abstract theological-political idea of sovereignty which is conceived to exist prior to any form of representation but which depends in its social efficacy on display and visibility. The essential similarity between the king's portrait's mimetic and displaying dimensions emerges from the assumption of a political reality which has to be depicted through defined «rules of translation» [28] enclosing the experience of contingency. The political sovereignty of the king does not originate from the discrepancy between the body politic and its forms of representation but from the imitation and display of an already existing cosmological order.

To sum up, it has been shown that the king, conceived as a model of God, derives his supreme authority not through acts of representation that emphasise the difference between the model of sovereignty and the image of the sovereign but through their amalgamation: the display of the «royal mystery» which is «the transubstantiation of the prince's body.» [29] The pictorial representations of Louis XIV refer ultimately to the king's body, marking it as the last link in the chain of signification which guaranteed the sacred unity of the body politic. When on the 21st of January 1792 the guillotine of the National Convention separated the physical head of Louis XVI from his mystical body, it also cut the link between society and its transcendent foundation of legitimacy. The place of power, formerly inhabited by the king's body, turned out to be empty.

The image of the people or society without a body

The radical shift from the idea of the king's absolute power during the *Ancien Régime* to the popular government of the *Première République française* marks the beginning of a new understanding of sovereignty and political thinking. As I will show in the article's second part, the changes in the conceptualisation of society and political formation are accompanied by a new understanding of portraiture and visual representation. Consider, as a complement to the work of Rigaud and Le Brun, a very different portrait of sovereignty: *The Death of Marat* (1793) by Jacques Louis David [fig. 4]. The portrait of Jean-Paul Marat shows the dead body of the Jacobin leader after being stabbed to death in his bath tub by Charlotte Corday in 1793. Against the backdrop of a dark wall one can see Marat's upper body leaning on the backrest of his tub which is covered with blood stained cloths, still holding a quill in his right hand and a letter in his left. My main interest here is how Marat's body is depicted and the elusiveness that surrounds it.

In his compelling interpretation of David's portrait of Marat, *Painting in the Year Two* (in particular paragraphs §40-§44), T. J. Clark develops a number of core theses. His starting point is the quintessential novelty that characterises the political meaning of the French Revolution: «the People's entry onto the stage of power.» [30] The political appearance of the people is accompanied by the emergence of a «new image of power» which revolves around the «question about representation», raising issues such as: who are 'the people'? Who can speak on their behalf and what legitimises their sovereignty? Clark points out the challenges of replacing the image of the absolute king whose power is inseparable from his own pictorial representations by a new image of power, being an image of the people. The important aspect is that the image of the people cannot be identical to the image of the king's absolute power as the ultimate representation of himself.



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The linchpin of both Clark's characterisation of *The Death of Marat* as modern painting and his analysis of the painting's political dimension is his interpretation of the moment of contingency which has entered «the process of picturing» [31].

To elucidate the wide-ranging meaning of this almost fashionable term a cursory glance at political philosophy is helpful. The contingent moment becomes explicit in Clark's description of Marat's dead body, as being «maneuvered into a state of insubstantiality.» [32] The «insubstantiality» of the sovereign's body stands in stark contrast to the eulogising depictions of the godly Louis XIV discussed above.

This is not simply an aesthetic problem but indicates more profound theoretical implications for the understanding of society and its foundations of legitimacy. The awareness and recognition of contingency, which is the experience of the collapse of any ultimate signification, can be regarded not only as the defining feature of modern political thinking but must be understood as its very condition. Contingency derives its political dimension from the experience that society can be ordered in a different way and that sovereignty can be achieved by means other than divine mandate. The experience of contingency emerges in the moment of crises and conflict when the clash of opposing social forces creates an awareness of both uncertainty and opportunity.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) might have been the first philosopher who recognised the clash of social actions as being the driving force behind all political thinking and who described politics as an uncertain field of conflicting interests. What makes this idea modern is the assumption that the state itself is based on a perpetual struggle between «virtue» and «Fortune». Other than Aristotle for instance, Machiavelli acknowledges that there is no essential structure to conserve. The internal division of society is an «effect of the modern disengagement from both a hierarchical representation of the cosmos and a theological basis for the legitimacy of the exercise of power.» [33]

In his analysis of Lefort's account of politics (or rather 'the political'), Bernard Flynn emphasises that it was Machiavelli who established the idea of a «metamorphosis by which civil society is transformed into political society, a transformation which happens [...] through the process of representation.» [34] However, one must not confuse processes of representation with the formation of political society in a modern democratic sense. A century after Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) famously sought to legitimise political sovereignty and institute a «commonwealth» through a social contract that concentrates all state power in the hands of the Leviathan. By virtue of his unchecked power resulting from the individual rights ceded by each citizen, the Leviathan represents the *unity* of the body politic. «For it is the *unity* of the presenter, not the unity of the represented, that maketh the person *one*.» [35]

However, the process of representation in Hobbes' view does not initiate political society but rather terminates it through the attempt of eliminating the contingent and conflictive nature of the social. The image of the Leviathan, the absolute sovereign, does not address the condition of its constitution but incorporates all his subjects (or contractual partners) into his own body. Here, the gap between the represented and their respective mode of representation, which is the place from which all political dynamics emerge, is closed. In distinction from the Leviathan, the portrait of Marat representing the people, thus providing a new image of power, draws attention to this particular gap and shows that modern political society is constituted upon its own reflection. Clark seems to pick up on this when he writes about «the accident and tendentiousness of politics» that was now included in David's «picture of the world» and «in its conception of what 'showing' now is.» [36] Showing here no longer means a display of absolute sovereignty but a reflection of its procedural and historical conditions - an awareness of its contingency. The historical conditions of sovereignty reveal themselves in an event of crisis indicating a moment when «signification breaks down and the groundlessness of [...] society as the (impossible) totality of all signification [...] is experienced.» [37] The portrait of Marat addresses such an event of crisis, a moment of social upheaval, when the absolutist model of sovereignty is called into question but a new social order has not yet been installed.

Clark elaborates further: «Contingency» is just a way of describing the fact that putting the People in place of the King cannot ultimately be done. The forms of the social outrun their various incarnations.» [38] The recognition of the impossibility of an ultimate representation of the people (or the social) has now become commonplace in poststructuralist political theory, where the social itself is understood to have no essence but to exist in an unlimited field of discourses. [39] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe emphasise the partial character of every form of social meaning (nodal points within the openness of the social) which results from «the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity.» [40] In the present context, contingency has to be understood as this general openness of the social, the acknowledgement of the ultimate impossibility to represent the social as discursive totality. That is to say, as Clark rightly points out, that not only the body of Marat but any body would be inadequate to stand for the people as a whole and that the process of representation appears to be the predominant technique of politics. [41]

Claude Lefort argues that what characterises democracy as a social form and differentiates it from the Ancient Régime is exactly the fact that «democratic society is instituted as a society without a body, as a society which undermines the representation of an organic totality.» [42] The impossibility of representing popular sovereignty as totality results from democracy being «instituted and sustained by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*» [43] and the missing ground of the social. As a consequence, society's non-identity with itself will always require a form of self-representation, or as Oliver Marchart sums it up: «No society without a quasi-representation of itself.» [44] Lefort accentuates that there is no society without a symbolic dimension and that no society is identical with itself since its very essence is what he calls a «self-division». The achievement of the democratically institutionalised society is the acknowledgement of this self-division and «the fact that, at the place of society's ground, the only thing we discover is an abyss.» [45]

According to Clark, the encounter with the abyss obtains a prominent position in David's portrait of Marat. The ambiguity of the depiction of Marat's body and its dual function as historic martyr and representative of the people does not refer to an already existing political reality but addresses the question of representation and the new image of power itself. Whereas the body of Louis XIV in the portraits by Rigaud and Le Brun embodies the endpoint of all signification, the ultimate signifier so to speak, the body of Marat represents the collapse of any ultimate signification. This means, the signifying ambiguity of his body, oscillating between the individual person and popular sovereignty, cannot ultimately be determined. This is where Clark's interpretation of the upper half of the picture comes into play. He relates it to «the concept's emptiness» [46], the empty notion of 'the people', which is the exact phenomenon that Lefort describes as the defining criterion of modern democracy: «Power was embodied in the prince, and it therefore gave society a body. And because of this, a latent but effective knowledge of what *one* meant to the *other* existed throughout the social. This model reveals the revolutionary and unprecedented feature of democracy. The locus of power becomes an *empty place*. [Le lieu du pouvoir devient un *lieu vide*.]» [47] The constant attempt to fill this empty place of power, to find an adequate image to represent the sovereign can be understood as the quintessential task of modern democracy. However, the ongoing search for the adequate representation of the people also problematises the very concept of popular sovereignty as depicted in *The Death of Marat*. The empty space of power in David's painting demonstrates that, in the words of Frank Ankersmit, «political power has its origin neither in the people represented nor in the representative but in the representation process itself.» [48]

Finally, it remains to ask whether «the people's entry onto the stage of power» and the immanence of sovereignty was able to discard the moment of transcendence from political thinking as reflected in Marat's portrait? Edward V. Gatacre and Laura Dru have pointed out that David's painting of Marat was derived from a wax portraiture made by Madame Tussaud which showed the revolutionary's body after his violent death - «presumably in effigy». [49] This would imply that the effigy of the dead Marat, a three-dimensional model of his body, would have served as a model for a painting which problematises the ambiguity of the universal and particular dimension of the sovereign's body.

The effigy of Marat and the adoration of his physique, still present in David's painting, join in in the cult of Marat that likes to compare the revolutionary to Jesus Christ and the image of his dead body to the depiction of the Pietà. [50] Clark has located this veneration for Marat «at the intersection between short-term political contingency and long-term disenchantment of the world.» [51] The comparison between the revolutionary Marat and Jesus Christ indicates a compensation for «the loss of the sacred», contributing to a political-theological discourse in which a transcendent moment shines through the secular fabric of the French Revolution. David's painting thus shows the myth of society's democratic self-foundation as well as the concept of popular sovereignty still bearing the marks of transcendence which early modern thought was so determined to remove from the political stage.

Conclusion

Concluding the above reflections about the relationship between the model and the image of sovereignty in modern political thought, one has to be aware of the close similarities between both terms and withstand the temptation to treat them as identical. By example of the portraits of King Louis XIV, I have shown that the portrait of the king, who himself was considered a model of God, functioned as a substitute of his physical body. In this sense, the portrait of the king also functioned as an instantiation of God presenting the abstract concept of divine power by the king's body and its pictorial representations. Therefore the king has to be understood as inseparable from his own image; he displayed his power as a model of sovereignty which derived its legitimacy in a place beyond time and space. The portrait of the king interpreted as model of divine sovereignty has a strong *mimetic element* suggesting an *imitative representation* of transcendent authority. The portrait of the king denies any difference between what is represented and its form of representation, signifier and signified, thus covering up the locus of the political.

The situation is different with the depiction of popular sovereignty discussed above as being legitimised by a society without a defined or unifying body. The attempt to temporarily fill the empty space of power has become the core characteristic of modern democracy recognising the contingent ground of the social. The contingent moment has entered David's picture of Marat in the guise of the insubstantiality of the sovereign's body reflecting the challenges of politics to navigate through an ever changing field of conflictive interests. The portrait of Marat is not a model of sovereignty; it has turned into its own image, a reflection on the concept of sovereignty as it were.

In opposition to the portraits of Louis XIV where the model of transcendent sovereignty and the concept of the body politic collapse in the image of the king, the portrait of the dead Marat demonstrates a different image of the political. Here, the image of the sovereign is no longer identical with the model of sovereignty and does no longer represent the organic unity of the people. Instead, the image of the sovereign shows its *non-identity* with the model of sovereignty. The examination of the sovereign's portrait, which reveals an intellectual shift from a divine model to a self-reflexive image, can thus help to clarify the inextricable connection between political power and its (aesthetic) forms of representation, which not only played a central role at the court of Louis XIV but remains relevant to the democratic systems of our time.

In this regard, I would like to reassess the quote of John Quincy Adams as cited at the beginning of this essay. Adams rightly criticises the idea that a democratic society cannot be subsumed under one symbolic representation in the sense of the absolute monarch. However, he seems to misunderstand the necessity of an imaginary image of the social which lies at the very bottom of democratic thinking. The essence of democracy is only «iconoclastic» regarding mimetic models of transcendent sovereignty, which attempt to ground their authority in a realm beyond society's discursive practices. Yet, it is anything but iconoclastic in the sense of the self-reflexive power of aesthetic representation.

As a mental concept of the social, which is the imaginary identity of the body politic, the image finds its correspondence in the countless variations of material image production of the mass media, fine arts and popular culture which all share in the symbolic formation of society. The role of the various image strategies in modern democracy is no longer the display of a given authority but the constant reminder that the negotiation of its appearance is its very essence. In this sense, the visual negotiations of society's symbolic order are merging into broader pictorial discourses exceeding the strategic use of the single image.

Most image strategies are part of a wider 'visual culture' unfolding their political potential by way of the «distribution of the sensible» [52], the «visual construction of the social field» [53] or the creation of a new sense of community through a «global dissemination of images» [54]. Hence, the aesthetic approach to politics today is just as relevant as at the court of Versailles, even though its purpose has changed radically. Aesthetic experience harbours no longer the privileged access to the mystery of the transubstantiation of the sovereign's body but reveals that it is the process of representation through which political reality comes into existence.

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Abbildungen

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Hyacinthe Rigaud, Louis XIV (1638-1715), 1701. Oil on canvas (277 x 194 cm). Louis XIV Collection, INV. 7492, Paintings. Musée du Louvre, Paris © RMN / Stéphane Maréchalle.

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Charles Le Brun, Alexander in Babylon ou Le Triomphe d'Alexandre, 1665, oil on canvas (450 x 707 cm). Louis XIV Collection, INV. 2898, Paintings. Musée du Louvre, Paris © RMN / Daniel Armandet / Gérard Blot.

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Charles Le Brun, La Franche-Comté pour la seconde fois, 1674, oil on canvas (93 x 140 cm). Ceiling painting from the Galerie des Glaces. Musée du Château, Versailles © RMN (Château de Versailles) / Gérard Blot.

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Jacques-Louis David, Marat assassiné, 1793, oil on canvas (162 x 128 cm). Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels © Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.