

The "Cat-Box"

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Mars Global Surveyor

In 1996 NASA launched the long awaited Mars Global Surveyor (MGS) spacecraft with Dr. Malin once again at the camera's helm. We were told that the MGS would thoroughly map the whole planet, including Cydonia, with the most detailed images ever taken of the Martian surface. The Mars Orbiter Camera (MOC) began imaging the Red Planet in September of 1997. On April 5, 1998 the Mars Orbiter Camera (MOC) aboard the Surveyor was slated to re-image the "Face" and put an end to the controversy. On April 6, 1998 Dr. Malin immediately released a distorted, low contrast image of the face (MOC - SPI-22003)¹ to the international media (Figure 1) and proclaimed that the "face was just a pile of rocks".



Figure 1

The Face on Mars

Detail of MOC image SPI-22003 (1998).

NASA's press release image of the Face, termed the "Cat-Box"

Note the elongated oval shape of the crater. This "crater" was deleted from most press releases.

This raw image of the "Face" was distorted and so stretched out that the New York Times immediately reported that it looked more like a "sandal print or a stuffed chili pepper" than a face² (Figure 2). Their comparison of the new MGS image with an insert of the earlier Viking image is very powerful.



Figure 2

New York Times, April 1998

Notice the elongated oval shaped crater in the lower left hand corner is cropped out.

A substantial amount of concerned researchers thought the original Viking picture of the Face was of much better quality. The new image was so strange that some advocates even speculated that Dr. Malin had taken a picture of the wrong mesa! Many critics soon referred to the new image of the Face as the "Cat Box" image.³ It quickly became clear that something was very wrong with this new image of the "Face". When the quality of the "Cat Box" image is compared to the archives of the many fine MOC images taken of the Martian geography, which had been imaged just a few months earlier, charges of another NASA cover up soon followed.

The MOC is equipped with a dynamic range of 2048 x 4800 pixels per image, which is exceptional. With the capabilities of this new, high resolution, camera we should have received a spectacular portrait of the "Face". Earlier in the year

NASA took a multitude of clear, high-resolution photographs of distinct regions of Mars, however, when it came to the "Face" the quality was comparatively poor. So what happened?

It seems that the powers that be at NASA decided to extend the down-track capabilities of the camera, at the expense of the cross-track and image resolution, in order to ensure capturing the "Face" mesa. Thus the resolution was reduced to from 4.3 meters per pixel to 2.1. However according to other experts the problem in capturing the "Face" mesa was not in the down-track capabilities but in the cross-track, evidenced by the fact the mesa was in the center of the down-track range. On top of it all, according to JPL's own image log, before the MGS image was released to the public it was processed through a "high-pass filter". This process basically suppresses detail and is normally utilized with line drawings and high contrast black and white pictures. The decision to use such a filter has never been successfully offered by NASA or JPL however, it's results are evident. The new image was found to have only 42 shades of gray while a normal MOC image was capable of 256.⁴ So where were the high-resolution images of the "Face" we were promised?

How could any NASA scientist make a fair and accurate decision about the nature of the new MGS "Face" within just six hours after viewing the raw image? This would be like taking a dark distorted picture of Mount Rushmore and stating to the world that there are no faces carved into the sides of this desolate cliff, it's only "shadows and rock". This rush to judgment and 'shoot from the hip' analysis is disturbing and at most poor science. Where is the careful and proper analysis of this fresh data? The distortions of the raw "Cat-Box" image can be confirmed by simply examining the elongated oval shape of the crater, just below and to the lower left of the "Face" mesa. In the original 1976 Viking image of the "Face" it is clear that this crater is perfectly round (Figure 3).

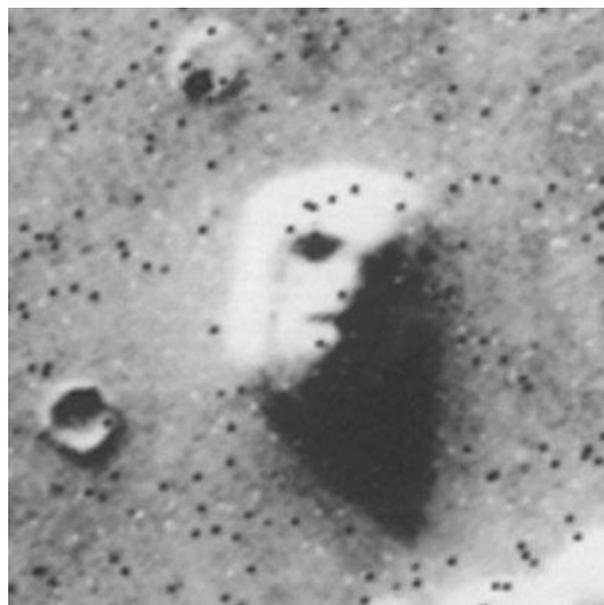


Figure 3
The original Viking Face (1976)
Notice the round crater on the left.

Just as NASA thought the debate surrounding the Face on Mars was over, additional condemnation of its handling of the cat-box release came from one of their own. Independent engineer and NASA subcontractor Lan Fleming⁵ performed his own analysis of the new cat-box image and published a scathing report titled “*The Politics of Science and JPL's "Catbox" Enhancement of the Face on Mars.*” As a result of his findings Fleming becomes totally convinced that the entire event was a calculated, public-relations stunt designed to squelch any further interest in the Face on Mars.⁶

Over the next few years Fleming’s research into the cat-box incident continued and as a result he publishes another critical examination of the official NASA data in his groundbreaking report “How to make a Catbox”. The following is a quote from that in-depth report:

“The Catbox is not a "poor" enhancement, as it is often called; it is a crude but very effective fraud perpetrated by employees or contractors to the United States government. Even if the Face is proven to be completely natural, this is inexcusable misconduct and a gross abuse of power. If the Face ultimately is proven to be artificial, the Catbox will certainly come to be regarded as the greatest, most malicious, and most destructive scientific hoax since the Piltdown Man, and perhaps of all time.”⁷

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Footnotes

1. Mars Viewer, MOC SP122003, *Mesa and Butte in Cydonia Mensae*, Dated April 5, 1998. <http://viewer.mars.asu.edu/planetview/inst/moc/SP122003#P=SP122003&T=2>
2. “New Mars Photos Cast Doubt on Speculation on a ‘Face,’ New York Times, April 1998, A24.
3. The term “cat box” was coined by radio host Art Bell (“Coast to Coast”) on April 6, 1998 and adopted by many analysts, after a caller’s comparison of the MGS Face image to a cat’s litter box.
4. See Richard C. Hoagland, “Honey I Shrunk the Face,” *The Enterprise Mission*, 14 April 1998. <http://www.enterprisemission.com/>
5. Society for Planetary SETI Research, <http://spsr.utsi.edu/members/lanfleming.html>.
6. Lan Fleming, “*The Politics of Science and JPL's "Catbox" Enhancement of the Face on Mars*”, VGL, October 18, 1998. <http://www.vgl.org/webfiles/mars/face/catbox.htm>
7. Lan Fleming, “*How To Make A Catbox*”, VGL, September 30, 2000. <http://www.vgl.org/webfiles/mars/face/catbox2.htm>