

**“Your Face is Not You”: The Human Face and Visual Technologies**

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This thesis presents an analysis of the relationship between the human face and visual technology from just before the invention of photography to the present day. The face is generally seen as the natural site of human identity and emotional expression, but these kinds of associations typically overlook the complex and subtle roles that media technologies play in framing the way that we experience and understand both our own faces and those of others. Each chapter addresses a different set of visual technologies, seeking to address the specific ways in which each tends to inflect the values and meanings we attach to faces. Overall, the project builds towards an understanding of the face as a political technology used to shape and organise human subjectivity.

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This is for all my kin, comrades, gurus, lovers, partisans, and my therapist. For better or for worse, none of this would have happened without you.

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**Introduction: “Your Face is Not You”**

Without the faith that our face expresses our self, without that basic illusion, that arch-illusion, we cannot live or at least we cannot take life seriously.

Milan Kundera, *Immortality*

**“Your Face is a Fiction”**

It’s morning. Not sure what time exactly. Post-pills, pre-coffee. I’m maybe one third awake. I stagger across the landing to the bathroom, take a piss, and as I go to wash my hands I meet my eyes in the mirror of the medicine cabinet. I shudder; for a fraction of a second I see my father blinking quizzically at me from the other side of the glass. He dissipates immediately, fading into the roundness of my cheeks, my (as yet) relatively unlined brow. We’re dead ringers, but only at a certain angle, in a certain light, for a passing instant. I wonder – does my face hide in his, as his haunts mine? Or do these echoes only travel in one direction?

I run my fingers from my left temple down along the curve of my jaw, stopping to tug out a tab of loose skin. As I age, this flesh will lose its elasticity, subsiding eventually into hanging jowls. I pick at a spot on the bridge of my nose, dig a grain of sleep from the corner of my eye, and gently massage my dark shadows. Beneath the thin lacquer of weariness, my eyes are quailing, as if about to crawl back into their sockets. I rub the stiff black hairs that, two days since my last shave, have sprouted around my mouth and down my neck. My chin is flabby and ill-defined – a sign of impotence and indecision. Pink blotches show through my sallow cheeks. Jaundice and shame. I look tired. And ill. Is *this* me? This *is* me. The two thoughts circle each other unceasingly, like wrestlers who never go in for the decisive clinch.

A strange thought worms its way towards the front of my mind. I have never seen my own face. Precisely because it is directly before my eyes and right under my nose, I am the one person it is always turned away from. At the very point at which my identity is confirmed and my emotions made flesh, where the correspondence between who I am and who I appear to be ought to be decisively sealed, a breach opens up, an incommensurability that is troubling because it proves the extent to which this relation is outside of my control. As the historian of science J.M. Watson puts it:

Your face is a fiction. Having never seen it yourself, you take the mirror and the photograph at their word, knowing that – at best – they permit only a second impression. You cringe when viewing pictures of yourself, not because you are vain, but because doing so forces you to acknowledge the chasm between your self and your surface. Estrangement from your body’s most personal marker is the condition of possibility for self-other awareness.[[1]](#footnote-1)

My face’s aversion from my self demonstrates my exposure to the gaze of the other. Only in their eyes are my face and my subjectivity truly aligned; only their recognition can ratify the correspondence of self and surface, a power they hold over me like a suspended sentence. It is an uncomfortable realisation, to discover that the force that knits my soul to my body might actually come from a point outside of me, over which I have only the remotest influence. On the one hand, my instinct is to reject this condition. After all, what purchase does my face actually have on my inmost being? What does it have to do with me, this likeness that is arbitrarily attributed to me from without, with neither my knowledge nor my say-so? Isn’t my identification with it merely a post-facto acceptance of other people’s ideas about the correlation of my inside and my out? But then again, my face marks and uncovers me in ways I will never be able to fully deny, for the simple reason that this marking, this uncovering occurs under the eye of the other, who recognizes my familiar aspect, or intuits my emotional state from a fleeting expression. How humiliating for such an intimate part of me to be revealed in this way, left out where everyone can see it except the person to whom it purportedly refers, constantly betraying me and giving me away! The face is a nether-region that is always on display, the site of an irreducible embarrassment – my inescapable dependence on the other, whose acknowledgment alone can deliver me from this painful oscillation between estrangement and vulnerability.

And yet the way out of this dilemma seems so easy. Trapped behind a pane of mirrored glass, my face becomes an object for me, a thing I can see, know and shape to my will. The movements of my mirror double are synchronised with my own, such that it becomes possible for me to live my face from the inside whilst simultaneously observing it from without. I can contract my muscles in different patterns to experiment with their expressive effects; I can coif my hair just so; I can apply razor blades and ointments to my skin. I learn the colour of my eyes, the shape of my nose, the proportion and distribution of my features, and I develop a perspective on each of these features, and how they relate to the characteristics of the individual they ostensibly embody. In this way, it becomes possible for me to experience my face as my property, allowing me to integrate it into the various fictions through which I project myself into the world. At the site of this ignominious subjective blind-spot, the mirror restores to me my face as the manifestation of my self-willed and self-created being.

**Not to be Reproduced**

In his 1937 painting *Not to be Reproduced*, the Belgian surrealist René Magritte depicted his famous patron Edward James, dressed in black and standing before a huge gold-framed mirror. James is turned away from the viewer, so that all we can see is his back. He appears to be gazing into the mirror, his head so close to the glass that his nose could almost be touching its surface. On the mantelpiece to his right lies a copy of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, the 1838 picaresque novel by Edgar Allen Poe. The scene is oriented such that we are peering over James’ shoulder. In the mirror we would expect to see the reflection of his face, absorbed in self-regard. But we do not. Instead, the glass displays an exact replication of what the viewer sees before it – that is, a reflection of the back of James’ head and shoulders. The book, meanwhile, appears as we would expect, its image inverted so that the cover text runs from right to left. The fact that the book is reflected normally suggests that there is nothing unusual about the mirror in itself. Rather, this peculiar scenario has to be understood as a product of the specific relationship between mirror and face.

It is part of the mirror’s magic that every image it reveals is a secret, vouchsafed solely to the viewer and no other being on earth. When I stand before the mirror, whether alone or in company, I experience myself as the sole referent of my reflected image. Its place within the reflective plane corresponds to my location in three-dimensional space, and it responds only to my movements. It is impossible to take the place of another and thereby usurp their reflection. The image is addressed to them exclusively. In this sense we can say that the mirror has no objectivity. There is no privileged standpoint from which we could see James’ reflection as he sees it, and so by withholding the image of his face the painting illustrates the fundamental opacity of his experience to us. No matter how close we get, the mirror will never show us what it shows him.

Should we conclude from this that what James sees, and what is therefore hidden from us, is the revelation of his true face? I do not think so. The mirror-gazer is presented with a vision of his face infused by self-consciousness, emphasising its responsiveness to his will whilst suppressing its involuntary or reflexive tendencies. His reflection reveals a form that is specially composed for this narcissistic *tête-à-tête*, but obscures the face which might appear in an unguarded moment, in response to a surprise, or to the words and actions of another. And so, even as the mirror turns James’ face towards him, there is still another visage that averts itself. This simultaneous movement of exposure and concealment is structurally inherent to the production of the face as a visual object. Whenever one side of it becomes evident and intelligible, there is always another that remains hidden and obscure. The feelings of gnawing frustration that this painting inevitably engenders in the viewer are therefore a bathetic echo of James’ own experience. Just as we are locked out of the private encounter between him and his face, so also is he excluded from the total and immediate disclosure of his face as the site of his subjectivity. We are equally tantalised by the promise that the mirror will uncover the face; we are likewise both refused the absolute revelation we desire.

Our experiences of the face, Magritte’s painting argues, are not ultimately derived from some noumenal “face as such”, the one true face that belongs to each individual and waits only for the moment of its revelation. On the contrary, they consist of a series of fragmentary and discontinuous encounters, whose qualities are determined by the pragmatic circumstances of the moment. It is the manner in which the face is framed and mediated, and the structure of the relationship that obtains between face and viewer, that determines the kinds of meanings it will embody. These variables can never be fully given in advance, and neither can they be replicated after the fact. No other can enter into the singular envelope of space-time marked out for James in the scene of this painting, and neither can he step outside of it to glimpse what his narrow perspective might have obscured. All that is common to the two experiences dramatized by *Not to be Reproduced* (i.e., James looking at his own face in the mirror, and the invisible and derealized viewer watching his reflection over his shoulder) is the sense of exclusion evoked by the back of James’ head, silently and sullenly averted from our gaze. This refusal to fully disclose itself, to unfold its meanings in their totality is, Magritte suggests, the face’s only essence. It is the figure of the contingency that will escape any representation, the non-objectivity that eludes any act of objectification. Its nature is to subvert the laws of the visible, the knowable and the objective – in a word, *Not to be Reproduced*.

In another of Magritte’s most famous paintings, 1964’s *The Son of Man*, a large green apple floats in mid-air, obscuring the face of the iconic bowler-hatted figure who inhabits so many of his works. It is rather unlike Magritte to allow such a transparent piece of symbolism into his image-repertoire – it might be surmised that the reason for this aberration was that this was one instance where his rhetorical ends would brook no ambiguity. The apple, inescapably, suggests the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Hence, the painting argues, it is a profoundly libidinal will to knowledge that draws us towards the face, tempting us to penetrate its surface and expose its secrets. At the same time, though, it is precisely this desire to subject the face to knowledge which prevents us from really seeing it. In an interview, Magritte once said of this picture:

Well, so you have the apparent face, the apple, hiding the visible but hidden, the face of the person. It’s something that happens constantly. Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible does not show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say, between the visible that is hidden and the visible that is present.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For Magritte, the face is the site of a ceaseless dialectic of revelation and concealment. The desire to know the face endlessly produces a visible object whilst surreptitiously exiling the contingent and the non-objective from its representation. This structural exclusion guarantees in turn that any representation of the face will necessarily be incomplete, thereby perpetuating the original scopic desire. If, therefore, we look to the face to instantiate the self, or the human essence, or any other metaphysical property, we are likely in for disappointment, because even as the previously hidden is made visible there will always be a secret that is missing from the picture. The promises of the face are infinite, the desires it inspires insatiable, closure can only be established by fiat. The mirror, Magritte cautions us, is a conjurer’s trick, and we delude ourselves if we believe it can extract us from this fundamental dynamic.

**Love Me, Love My Face**

In an early scene from Milan Kundera’s 1990 novel *Immortality*, a woman named Agnes sits alone in her Parisian apartment, waiting for her husband Paul to come home. To pass the time, she begins to leaf idly through a stack of magazines. As she turns the pages, she is at first struck, then gradually disquieted by the number of faces she finds looking back at her. Searching through one magazine cover to cover, she counts “ninety-two photographs showing nothing but a face; forty-one photographs of a face plus a figure; ninety faces in twenty-three group photographs and only eleven photographs in which people played a secondary role or were totally absent. Altogether, the magazine contained two hundred and twenty-three faces.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The experiment sparks a disturbing insight, which she attempts to share with Paul upon his return:

She opened the magazine again and said: ‘If you put the pictures of two different faces side by side, your eye is struck by everything makes one different from the other. But if you have two hundred and twenty-three faces side by side, you suddenly realize that it’s all just one face in many variations and that no such thing as an individual ever existed.

Paul tries to comfort her: “Agnes…Your face does not resemble any other…If you love somebody you love his face and then it becomes totally different from everyone else’s.” But his words have the opposite effect, driving Agnes deeper into her despondency. “Yes,” she replies, “you know me by my face, you know me as a face and you never knew me any other way. Therefore it could never occur to you that my face is not my self.” Trying to illustrate her distress, she asks Paul to imagine living in a world without mirrors:

You’d dream about your face and imagine it as an outer reflection of what is inside you. And then, when you reached forty, someone would put a mirror before you for the first time in your life. Imagine your fright! You’d see the face of a stranger. And you’d know quite clearly what you are unable to grasp: your face is not you.

“A face,” she concludes, “is like a name. It must have happened some time towards the end of my childhood: I kept looking in the mirror for such a long time that I finally believed that what I was seeing was my self…And why? Why did I want to identify with *this*? What do I care about this face?” In spite of her efforts, Paul cannot understand what is troubling his wife. Rather than attempting to get to the bottom of the matter, he smothers the conversation with ignorant and ineffectual solicitude, setting off the rest of the novel’s melancholy trajectory.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This sad little contretemps stages two opposed understandings of the relationship between face and subject. For Paul, the face is simply the physical manifestation of the self; the two are essentially homologous. His complacency in this regard is symbolised by his grotesque resemblance to his mother, a likeness that has troubled Agnes since he first introduced them and which tends to recur to her at the most inopportune moments: “Later on, when Paul and Agnes made love, some sort of spite reminded her of this likeness and there were moments when it seemed to her as if an old woman was lying on top, her face distorted with lust.” The physical similarity of Paul and his mother is, to Agnes, further evidence that our faces do not simply single us out. They also locate us relative to other individuals and groups, demonstrating all the ways in which our identity is dependent on factors that extend beyond our bodies and our immediate presence – family, sociality, gender, race and so on. Paul, of course, is blind to all this, having “forgotten long ago that his face bore an imprint of his mother” and convinced himself “that it was his and no one else’s.”[[5]](#footnote-5) His resemblance to his mother, then, becomes emblematic of his naïve faith in the face’s capacity to body forth a unique self, and it is the evidence of this naïveté, rather than the inappropriate intrusion of her mother-in-law into her sex life, that really repulses Agnes. It demonstrates that her husband will never be able to understand or sympathise with her, because he will never be able to grasp the root of her existential crisis.

Paul’s attempts to reassure Agnes only prove the extent of his obliviousness. Confronted with the observation that faces are at least as generic as they are individuated, he asserts that the act of loving a person can nevertheless forge an affinity between their face and their being – “If you love somebody you love his face and then it becomes totally different from everyone else’s.” This is the last thing that Agnes needs to hear under the circumstances, because it affirms her suspicion that if there is no inherent link between self and face, then this connection will instead be imposed on the subject from without by the (mis)recognition of one’s peers. After all, the corollary of the complacent belief that *I am my face* is that *everybody else is their face as well*. Paul’s conciliatory words are therefore an implicit assertion that Agnes can be no more or less than the person she appears to be as a face, whether she likes it or not. His love traps her in her face.

As Agnes comes to understand the contingency of her relationship to her own face, she shifts her understanding of this dynamic from a physiological (the face as a distinctive feature of her anatomy) to a psychological register (the face as an image that she learns to identify with). Her exchange with Paul, however, relocates the problem once more, this time from the psychological to the social level. His blundering attempts to soothe his wife demonstrate that the self-face equation is not settled simply by her identification with her mirror image, but also by what her face signifies in the eyes of others. After all, Agnes may very well decide that she is “not her face,” but so long as Paul and others go on believing otherwise, her own stance on the matter will have limited practical consequences. Her face, she discovers, is the site of a struggle between her desire to choose the degree to which she identifies with this or that aspect of her personhood, and the need of others see her manifested in and as a face.

**The Face as a Technology of the Self**

We could put this another way. Agnes, unlike Paul, has grasped the face’s fundamentally technological nature. This phrase should be understood first of all in the context of Foucault’s never fully realised project on the “technologies of self.” In his words, “technologies of the self…permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Clearly, this implies an unusually ecumenical definition of the word “technology.” As Foucault explains in the interview “Space, Knowledge and Power”, his understanding of the technological is derived from “what the Greeks called the *techne*, that is to say, a practical rationality governed by a conscious goal.” “A very narrow meaning is given to “technology”,” he continues, “one thinks of hard technology, the technology of wood, of fire, of electricity. Whereas government is also a function of technology: the government of individuals, the government of souls, the government of the self by the self, the government of families, the government of children, and so on.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The idea of *techne*, then, encompasses not only tools or machines, but also ritualised behaviours, rote patterns of thought or speech, costume, grooming practices and any number of other phenomena, insofar as these are organised by a practical rationality directed towards the “technological” transformation or optimisation of some aspect of human life.

Looked at this way, it becomes possible to understand a great many of my behaviours *vis-à-vis* my face as technological. I wash, shave and moisturise; I rub in cream to calm red blotches; I affect a pair of thick black shades; I try to smile more often than I feel like it. In company I grin, mug and gurn, anxiously hoping that the contortions into which I put my face conform to the front I am trying to maintain for my peers. Meanwhile, I couch my face in mannerisms and tics, like Jean-Paul Belmondo’s Michel in Godard’s *À Bout de Souffle*, who wipes his thumb along his top lip in imitation of his idol Humphrey Bogart. Through each of these techniques I author and enact, however ineptly, the “fiction” of “my face” as the thing that represents me to the world. In this way, the congenital blind-spot that is my face is reintegrated into my self-image, helping me to sustain the belief that I can after all wield some degree of mastery over the relationship between my essence and my appearance.

Concluding his thought (quoted above) about the face’s inherent fictionality, Watson reflects that this condition “compels you to create technologies of recuperation – fashion, gesture, stories – with which to gloss the certainties that your face has already put into motion. This estrangement is the wellspring of human (mis)communication.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This phrase – “technologies of recuperation” – helps us grasp the extent to which the behaviours through which I relate to my face are not so much “extensions of man”, to use McLuhan’s phrase, as they are *orthopaedic* measures designed to compensate for a fundamental deficiency.[[9]](#footnote-9) They neither add to or enhance our capacities; rather, they seek to mitigate the blindness that defines our relationship to our own faces. In this sense, these “technologies of recuperation” present a paradox. They seek to return the face to the individual as if it were a thing which we had lost, when in fact what we are trying to recover (i.e. the transparent relationship of face to subject) never existed in the first place. I have never had mastery of the relation between my face and my self. The face that I imagine to express my being is not a native possession which I reclaim with the aid of technology, but a prosthesis through and through, cobbled together from a miscellany of reflections, images, expressions, fantasies and styles which I’ve appropriated over time, or else have been imposed on me without my knowledge or consent. It is an artefact that I am constantly in the process of updating and refining, and since there is no prototype towards which my work is directed, my labours will never be fully concluded. The relationship of my face to my self will remain contingent and open-ended, at least until the point when my living visage hardens finally into my death mask.

The face, then, is the site of a constitutive lack at the very root of the subject, demonstrating the subject’s inability to perceive or define its own foundations. I respond to this lack by marshalling a range of technologies through which I attempt to reverse the face’s significance, transforming it from the humiliating proof of my ontological dependency into the material embodiment of my sovereign personhood. This is the sense in which Agnes understands the face – as the site of one of the foundational illusions which make it possible to live as a person in the world: “Without the faith that our face expresses our self, without that basic illusion, that arch-illusion, we cannot live or at least we cannot take life seriously.” This investment, apparently so easy for most people, is one which Agnes has long found problematic. She recalls a childhood conversation she had with her father, who when she asked whether he believed in God replied, “I believe in the Creator’s computer,” an image which Agnes understands to imply a kind of materialist deism. The physical laws of the universe, her father suggested, are like computer programs, designed and uploaded by a divinity which then absents itself from the scene. Whilst they leave a certain latitude for freedom and happenstance, these algorithms define the general parameters of all forms of existence. All of creation is essentially a prototypical expression of these initial formulae, even and especially human beings. On this basis, she reasons, the human individual has no more claim to a unique essence than an industrially produced commodity. Both are subjectively distinctive entities whose form ultimately relates back to a set of general specifications, rather than to the characteristics of some intrinsic soul.

The computer did not plan an Agnes or a Paul, but only a prototype known as a human being, giving rise to a large number of specimens which are based on the original model and haven’t any individual essence. Just like a Renault car. Its essence is deposited outside, in the archives of the central engineering office. Individual cars differ only in their serial numbers. The serial number of a human specimen is the face, that accidental and unrepeatable combination of features. It reflects neither character nor soul, nor what we call the self. The face is only the serial number of a specimen.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Here, the face’s significance is startlingly flipped. Instead of identifying each individual as the manifestation of a unique essence, it advertises the extent to which the human subject is unfoundationed, a no more than contingent outgrowth of vast and impersonal systems (of evolution, ecology, physics) which both transcend and antedate it, and which are in themselves perfectly indifferent to human interests and values. The face is nothing more than the evidence of a creature’s genetic prototypicality; it bears no more relation to the singular properties of a being than a serial number does to the qualities of the product to which it is assigned.

This is, Agnes understands, the kind of reality of which humankind cannot bear very much. In order to “take life seriously”, to invest oneself wholeheartedly both in the mundane doings of one’s daily existence and the loftier projects of a more broadly conceived “humanity”, it is necessary to believe that life has a meaning that goes beyond itself and exists outside the mechanistic articulation of the laws of physics, evolution and so on. If the face is just a serial number, then it only emphasizes the absurdity of such seriousness. If, however, we choose to identify ourselves with our faces, deluding ourselves that they actually do represent the essence of our unique subjectivity, then they become the site of one of the “arch-illusions” which make life liveable.

When we are thrust out into the world just as we are, we first have to identify with that particular throw of the dice, with that accident organized by the divine computer: to get over our surprise that precisely *this* (what we see facing us in the mirror) is our self…only in this way can we regard ourselves not merely as a variant of a human prototype but as a being with its own irreplaceable essence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This delusive identification of face with self allows us to believe that our variously prototypical or aleatory characteristics are in fact the expression of an essence. In this way, the face binds the accident of the body to the substance of the soul, insisting that the two are inextricable and simultaneous, and therefore that the subject contains within itself its own justification, its own destiny, its own *telos*. By treating our serial numbers as if they were the poems of our immortal souls, we can forget that we are the simply the latest unit off the production line of the creator’s computer, the better to passionately engage ourselves with the struggles of human existence.

Agnes is no longer capable of sustaining this pretence. Nauseated by the banality of the world around her and the self-absorbed ignorance of her loved ones, she is compelled to reject her face as the sign that binds her to them and, by extension, to the “world with which [she] disagree[s].”[[12]](#footnote-12) In her despondency, she cultivates a fantasy about an encounter with an extra-terrestrial being, who promises to take her to a planet that is not only without mirrors, but faces as well. It is not indicated whether this means an anatomical absence, or rather a general disinterest in reading and sorting individuals by their external features – when Agnes asks her visitor how the inhabitants of this place are distinguished from one another, it replies that “[t]hey’re all their own creations. Everybody, so to speak, thinks himself up.”[[13]](#footnote-13) It is clear that the crux of this fantasy is not so much a literal bodily transformation as it is an escape from the face’s ontological imposition – the obligation to identify with an image that other people have forged for her. Agnes is not naïve. She understands that to reject the face in this sense is not to realize a dream of radical self-determination, as the alien seems to promise, but rather the inverse – total self-negation. As she realises not long before her death, “What is unbearable in life is not *being* but *being one’s self*.” The best future she can conceive of is a kind of ecstatic dissolution: “Living, there is no happiness in that. Living: carrying one’s painful self through the world. But being, being is happiness. Being: becoming a fountain, a fountain on which the universe falls like warm rain.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Mirrors and Magazines**

Agnes’ tragic fatalism is the bitter aftertaste that balances the ludic melancholy of the novel’s other strands. Nonetheless, it could be observed that her resignation results ultimately from not pursuing her discoveries far enough. She grasps something of the technological nature of the human face, in the Foucauldian sense. She also intuits the extent to which her identification with her face depends on technology in a more literal way, recognizing the critical functionality of the mirror with regard to this process. However, having identified the role that technology has played in shaping the relationship between her self and her face, she never fully comes to terms with the ways in which these technologies might have determined the trap in which she finds herself.

Let’s begin with the mirror. She describes how, as a child, she spent hours narcissistically staring at her reflection until she internalised the idea that her face was the concrete embodiment of her unique individuality. In accordance with the law of “immediacy” – as defined by the theorists Bolter and Grusin, the idea that “the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented” – she then forgets the role of the mirror in facilitating this delusion, assuming an essential relation between face and self.[[15]](#footnote-15) Only retrospectively does she realise that this putatively subjective, psychological process of identification was in fact dependent on the orthopaedic function of the mirror as technology. The effects of intimacy and reciprocity that she mistook as the qualities that bound her face to her self were in fact the simple material properties of a pane of silvered glass. And since the mirror is neither a natural or inevitable object, but a human invention – since it is possible, however difficult, to imagine “a world without mirrors” – the homology she presumed between her self and her face cannot itself be essential or primordial. Her existential investment in her own face is and always was, she realises, the product of a vulgar conjurer’s trick.

At this point, though, it is essential to recall that this insight was sparked by Agnes’ experience with a quite different visual technology – the magazine. It was flipping through the magazine, with its ranks on ranks of faces of all kinds, that helped to crystallize her thoughts about their basically generic nature, and hence led her to reassess her relationship with her mirror image. If it is one of the structural properties of the mirror to foster personal identification and to cultivate the myth of uniqueness, then it is the tendency of the magazine to do the opposite. Rather than producing the face within the artificial solitude and intimacy of a narcissistic *tête-a-tête*, it presents multiple faces arranged in series and juxtaposed with text and other images. Instead of the mirror’s real-time mimicry, it imbues it with the static objectivity of the photograph. Represented thusly, the meaning of the face tends to emerge syncretically, through cross-reference with its context, rather than seeming to rise up *sui generis* from the depths of the reflected gaze. In this way, the illustrated magazine relativizes the essential relation between self and face suggested by the mirror. It frames the face according to the conditions of what Baudrillard called the “industrial” sign, where images are mass-produced in series. Under mass-production, “[the] relation between [sign and object] is no longer that of an original to its counterfeit – neither analogy nor reflection – but equivalence, indifference. In a series, objects become undefined simulacra one of the other. And so, along with the objects, do the men that produce them.” This constitutes “a process of absorption of all original being” into a system where “potentially identical beings are produced in an indefinite series.”[[16]](#footnote-16) When faces become a standardized, mass-produced object, the fine differences between them are rendered trivial compared to the conformity of the general template out of which faces are produced. Or, as Agnes understands it: “The serial number of a human specimen is the face.”

The contrast between the face as it appears in the mirror, and as it appears in the illustrated magazine, demonstrates to Agnes that the self-face relation is technologically mediated, and therefore in a certain sense arbitrary. The choice, it seems to her, is either to delusionally identify herself with the “serial number” assigned to her by the “Creator’s computer”, or else to strive for a kind of cloistered self-negation. In her fatalism, she fails to see that her realisations offer her a third way, although it is perhaps not much more consoling than the other two. Her error is that she takes both the mirror and the magazine as monolithic structures that reflect inescapable techno-psychological mechanisms, as if they were the inevitable consequence of inherent human tendencies. In this respect, her thought experiment of a “world without mirrors” is misleading. To imagine an existence where all such technologies have disappeared or else never existed may seem like a fantastical counter-factual, but to conceive of a time when mirrors were substantially different both in their material structure and their contexts of use is not so outlandish. With regard to European society, one need only look back a couple of hundred years to find a condition in which the general availability, cultural status and visual quality of mirrors were simply incomparable to their current level. And if one accepts the proposition that the mirror has a vital role to play in the development of the face-self relation, then it follows that any changes to the mirror will necessarily affect that relation. The way that we understand the connection between the face and subjectivity, then, is only determined to the extent that it is subject to the broader story of visual technology and its social applications. Agnes’ real problem is that she doesn’t historicize her analysis.

**Agnes Through the Lacanian Looking-Glass**

In this regard, and by way of offering a more technical illustration of the point, Agnes’ attitude to the mirror is not unlike that of the psychoanalysts. Readers of a certain disposition will doubtless already have been reminded of Lacan’s famous work on the “mirror stage,” which, along with the broader psychoanalytic account of ego-formation, provides a persuasive description of Agnes’ experience. Agnes traces her identification with her face to her childhood habit of mirror-gazing, when she looked at her reflection for so long that she eventually came to believe that her face and her self were the same thing. On a similar note, Lacan theorized that it is between the ages of six and eighteen months that the child first begins to develop a body image. A newborn child, he reasoned, lacks any notion of itself as an I, experiencing its body initially as a fragmented bundle of sensations and uncoordinated motor functions. Only gradually does it start to relate these sensorimotor experiences to an *imago* – the mental image of itself as if seen from the outside, as an individualized being located within the bounds of a whole body. A crucial part of this process of self-recognition are the child’s first encounters with its own reflection. In front of the mirror, the child learns through play to identify its developing consciousness with what it sees therein. Gradually, the child is able to rationalize the “turbulent movements” of sensation and desire that animate it as the actions and reactions of this body that it recognizes as its own, but in the process it weds itself to an illusion of totality.[[17]](#footnote-17) The function of the ego thus develops in the first instance as the force that will project and sustain this totality, even to the point of neurosis:

Here we see the ego, in its essential resistance to the elusive process of Becoming, to the variations of Desire. This illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy ascent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The face’s place in this structure seems intuitive and straightforward. Seeing one’s face in the mirror provides us with the illusion of ownership and control, allowing us to identify ourselves with its forms, features and characteristic motions. Not only do we falsely equate the face with the self, but we are also encouraged to think of the self as a kind of homunculus that exists “behind” the face and which can be known through its expressive properties. In this sense, the process of self-face identification represents a microcosm of the broader alignment of ego and body-image that Lacan describes. Perhaps every time we glance in a mirror we are rehearsing the child’s act of misrecognition, papering over the gap between self and surface by allowing ourselves to believe that we are the face that stares back at us. This would accord with Lacan’s later shift away from his initial developmental understanding of the mirror stage towards seeing it as a fundamental aspect of the subject’s relation to the Imaginary.

It is interesting to note that Lacan hardly mentions the face in any of his major works on the mirror stage – a mystifying omission. Perhaps it was precisely the intuitive allure of the face which prompted him to leave it out of his theory. His aim, after all, was to denaturalise the relationship between the subject and its body-image. What better way to do this than to strip the body of its face, implicitly suggesting that the latter is merely an epiphenomenal after-effect of a more fundamental misrecognition? Then again, there are other plausible rationales. For instance, by minimizing the role of the face in the dynamic of subject and *imago,* Lacan is able to surreptitiously bracket the potentially broader implications raised by the themes of sociality and otherness. One of the most important theoretical functions of the mirror stage concept is to demonstrate the psychoanalytic concept of “primary narcissism” – the notion that the subject’s relation to its reflected ego-Ideal is the fundamental structure of selfhood. The attraction of the little “drama” of the mirror stage for Lacan was that it “would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The development of the auto-erotic libido takes hold, Lacan explicitly states, before sociality and before language – it is “*primordial*”, which is to say, an essential, trans-historical component of human psychology. Like Agnes, Lacan believes that he has discovered something eternal and ineluctable in the relationship between man and mirror, a truth that underpins the crusty misanthropy of the worldview embodied in passages like the following: “For every day in our practice we are confronted with the disastrous results of marriages based on such self-sacrifice, of commitments undertaken in the spirit of narcissistic illusion which corrupts *every attempt to assume responsibility for other people*” (italics mine).[[20]](#footnote-20) For Lacan, we are all narcissists before we are anything else, and to believe that it possible to act on behalf of another without reference to one’s own gratification is a vain self-deception. We may or may not agree with this characterisation of human existence – either way, we must recognise the fundamental role of the mirror in establishing it as part of the primordial process of ego-identification.

The error here is the same as Agnes’. Lacan presumes the mirror as the uniformly transparent mediator of this fundamental process of auto-erotic identification. But mirrors are not uniform objects. They can be different shapes and sizes; they can be made of glass, metal or even water; they can have differing degrees of clarity, or tendencies or flaws which exaggerate certain parts of the image while contracting others. The means of their production change over time, which affects their price and therefore who can afford to own them. The behavioural norms which dictate their use also vary, as do the functions they are supposed to serve. In the Middle Ages, mirrors were not only cosmetic devices, but also portals through which clairvoyants could consort with demons, spirits and other extra-dimensional beings – a practice known as catoptromancy.[[21]](#footnote-21) As MacFarlane and Martin demonstrate in their “world history” of glass, the rationalisation of the mirror was a protracted process inextricably bound up with the articulation of the geometric and optical theories of which Lacan makes such idiosyncratic use.[[22]](#footnote-22) They further observe that the technical innovations which, around the sixteenth century, allowed for the production of good quality glass mirrors in large quantities coincide with “introspective biography,” portraiture and other incunabula of “the individual” – a history which Lacan neglects to address.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Lacan’s theory actually demands a quite specific kind of mirror, large and clear enough for a child to perceive its body as a whole, and presumably free-standing. It also requires a particular context – one of quiet bourgeois domesticity, in which the child is afforded the time and space to develop its identification with its own image. These criteria stipulate a relatively recent innovation, since it was only in the nineteenth century that mirrors of this size and quality became a commonplace accessory amongst the growing urban bourgeoisie. As Peter Sloterdijk points out:

Only in a mirror-saturated culture could people have believed that for each individual, looking into one’s own mirror image realized a primal form of self-relation. And only in a population defined – across all classes – as mirror-owners could Freud and his successors have popularized their pseudo-proofs for so-called Narcissism and the supposedly visually transmitted auto-eroticism of humans.[[24]](#footnote-24)

There is, I think, a kind of projection at work here. Lacan’s theory divests the human psyche of its wholeness, decomposing the consistency of the ego-ideal into a “body in bits and pieces (*corps morcelé*).”[[25]](#footnote-25) The fantasy of totality, however, is not absolutely done away with. Instead, it is transferred onto the mirror, which is treated as a placid medium for the transmission of formative psychological delusions. In the same gesture with which he deconstructs the ego, Lacan reifies the mirror as a seamless, uniform transparency through which the theorist can spy upon this drama of neonatal *méconaissance*. And so, having liberated the subject from one illusion, he releases it into another – the dream of a human nature prior to history or technicity.

The perfect uniformity of Lacan’s mirror allows him to shift the target of his discourse from the subject as a putatively psycho-social entity to the “primordial” properties of the human as a species. Viewed through a lens unsmudged by historical or technical specificity, the face emerges as the emblem of the biogenetic destiny of mankind, of the characteristics which define it in its essence. There are, as with any attempt to hypostatize the properties of the human qua human, real ethical dangers bound up with this perspective. These will be elaborated in due course. At this point, however, it is necessary to stress the following: It may well be, as Lacan and Agnes both suspect, that our identification with the facial image is a sign that we are all inevitably prisoners of the ego to a greater or lesser extent. But this proposition cannot be proven on the basis of the mirror, at least not without undertaking a far more thorough investigation of its technical properties, its history, and the various social uses to which it has been put. Regardless, in the course of what follows we will find that those who have taken it upon themselves to describe and explain the face to us repeatedly take it for granted that whatever visual technology they have to hand can reveal it to us in its immediacy, and open it up as window onto the human in itself.

As Agnes’ experiences suggest, however, this is a dubious proposition. In fact, different media organise our understanding of the face in radically different ways, and to various ends. There is variability both within and between the general categories of visual technology. A small hand-held mirror of polished steel will support a quite distinct self-face relation in comparison to a floor-to-ceiling psyche, whilst an illustrated magazine organizes this dynamic in a way that is unlike either. Film realigns the terms of the problem once again, as do contemporary innovations such as automated facial recognition and emotion analytics. Each media form contains a range of possibilities with regard to how the face can be represented – possibilities which will be realised strategically, according to relevant social, political and economic exigencies, which must in their turn be accounted for in our analysis. What is required, then, as a necessary prelude to any claims we might want to make about the relationship between face, media and subject, is a genealogy of the face-visual technology relation. This approach must address the ways in which the concrete specificities of the technologies in question shape the face’s semiotic capacities, not as an end in themselves, but insofar as they materialise the broader cultural and political forces bearing upon the representation of the face in a particular historical moment. We must discover the rationale according to which images of the face were produced, and how this affected their composition; we have to attend to the mechanisms of their circulation and the conditions of their use. Having taken all of this into account, it should then be possible for us to name some of the ways in which the practice of technological mediation might have determined how people think about and experience the human face.

Ultimately, what is at issue both for Agnes and Lacan is not simply the way that the face- or body-image mediates *a* self in particular, but *the* self in general. Or to put it another way, just as a face is expected to mark out those characteristics which distinguish an individual in itself, so it is also supposed to manifest the qualities which define the human as such. So for Agnes, her troubled relation with her face is an embodiment not just of her own anomie, but also of the self-delusion and conformism which dogs the human condition at large, whilst for Lacan the subject’s identification with its mirror image acts out the ineluctability of primary narcissism.

Viewed from this perspective, the face begins to resemble a figure of the “human essence” as described by Marx in the “Theses on Feuerbach”: “an internal, dumb generality which *naturally* unites the many individuals.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Glossing Marx’s thoughts on this topic, Louis Althusser explains that the idea of the human essence at its most fundamental represents not a particular list of transcendental “human characteristics” (which vary according to the purposes for which the figure of the human is being invoked) but a “type-structure” through which this set of ideal characteristics is attributed to each human as an individual, whilst the qualities of such-and-such an individual are simultaneously idealised and raised to level of “human nature”. In Althusser’s words: “an empiricism of the subject always corresponds to an idealism of the essence (or an empiricism of the essence to an idealism of the subject.)” He continues:

In this type-structure it is possible to recognize not only the principal theories of society (from Hobbes to Rousseau), of political economy from (Petty to Ricardo), of ethics (from Descartes to Kant), but also the very principle of the (pre-Marxist) idealist and materialist ‘theory of knowledge’ (from Locke to Feuerbach via Kant). The content of the human essence of or the empirical subjects may vary (as can be seen from Locke to Kant): the terms presented and their relations only vary within the invariant type-structure which constitutes this very problematic...[[27]](#footnote-27)

What Althusser explains here is the way in which the “type-structure” of the human essence produces the figure of the human qua human who subtends these various systems of thought – from the paranoid and violent individual who underlies the Hobbesian worldview to Rousseau’s noble savage, from Locke’s blank slate to Kant’s transcendental subject. The essential function of the “type-structure” is to mediate between these ideal figurations on the one hand, and empirically existing subjects on the other, bypassing the fundamental structuring role of history, class, social forces, modes of production and so forth. In this way, these systems can claim to ground themselves in the essential capacities of the human in itself, much as Lacanian psychoanalysis purports to base itself in the “primordial” fact of primary narcissism.

One of the face’s basic technological functions, I argue, is to express this type-structure as a visual form embedded in the body. To this end, its semiology typically strikes out simultaneously in opposite directions – on the one hand towards the irreducibility of individual existence, and on the other to the types, categories and schema through which that existence can be ordered and rationalised. It attempts to hold in unison two very different notions of the concept of life – that which Giorgio Agamben calls *zoē* (“the simple fact of living common to all living beings”) and *bios* (“the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group”).[[28]](#footnote-28) In so doing, the technology of the face attempts to respond to a tension inherent to the physiological structure of the face itself.

**The Prow of Animals**

Let me show what I mean. On the one hand, the basic facial pattern of “two horizontally positioned eyes above a single centrally placed nose and mouth”[[29]](#footnote-29) seems to be the physiological threshold for a certain kind of existence, shared solely between vertebrates, arthropods (i.e. insects and crustaceans) and cephalopods (i.e. squids and octopuses). This arrangement, which is peculiar to these three categories amongst the thirty-three known phyla which constitute the animal kingdom, is the product of a set of fundamental evolutionary pressures. According to biologist Adam S. Wilkins, the development of the face began some 500 million years ago, when the first fish-like proto-vertebrates began to move under their own power in search of food, instead of acquiring nutrients by sifting seawater through their gills as they drifted more or less aimlessly through the primordial ocean.[[30]](#footnote-30) With this change, the mouth shifts from passive filtration device to what Georges Bataille so aptly dubbed “the beginning or, if one prefers, the prow of animals,”[[31]](#footnote-31) marking the transition from “chordate” to “craniate” (literally “skull-having”) life. Now that the mouth defined the direction of travel, orienting the animal towards a specific goal in the external world, it necessarily became the locus of the visual and olfactory apparatuses which would allow it to navigate, and the more complex neural-processing system – the brain – which would allow it to interpret and act on the information it provided. The final component to this basic facial template was the jaw, which allowed the gnathostomes (the technical classification for “jawed creatures”) to fully capitalise on their sensory and neural capacities by allowing access to a wider range of food sources, as opposed to their agnathan (jawless) counterparts. This advantage established a hegemony which, in a sense, is still to end, as the new feeding possibilities enabled by the jaw not only secured the pre-eminence of the gnathostomes at sea, but also enabled them to diversify to other environments. Wilkins calls the jaw a “key innovation,” by which he means “an evolutionary change that facilitates a major adaptive change that in turn permits a major expansion and diversification of the organisms bearing this new feature, an adaptive radiation,” and goes on to speculate that, “[h]ad craniates never moved beyond the agnathan (i.e., jawless) “grade,” they would probably not have become the top predators, dominating the food chains in both the seas and on land.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

The adaptive benefits of this facial blueprint are attested by its durability. As Wilkins says, “[it] is striking how little the vertebrate face has changed in general structure from the first full-fledged gnathostomes of the Devonian period to those of today – namely, all contemporary vertebrates apart from the handful of agnathan species.”[[33]](#footnote-33) The bilaterally symmetrical pattern of two eyes, an olfactory organ and a mouth is shared by humans, snakes, and the tiny fish-like gnathostomes of 400 million years ago. In this sense, it is proof that we are, all of us craniates (not to mention the arthropods and cephalopods), subject to the same fundamental biophysical exigencies. It is the need to find food which gives rise to the face, the process of locomotion which motivates its frontal orientation and the force of gravity which determines its vertical organisation. The evolutionary pressures that gather together and arrange these sensory and digestive organs into the shape of the face are so basic that Martin Gardner has argued, in his book *The Ambidextrous Universe*, that even prospective extra-terrestrial lifeforms would be likely to possess a set of features we could recognise as such: “Since light, sound and molecules certainly exist on other planets, it seems likely that evolution would invent senses to exploit these phenomena…For protection, the valuable brain would need to be heavily encased and as far from the ground as possible, where it would be best shielded from the shocks of moving about. Sensory organs, close to the brain and in front, would create something like a face.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

Looked at this way, the face is a basic proof of common exposure to the necessities of creaturely existence, embodying a set of biophysical constants which encompass the vast majority of beings we typically think of under the rubric of “animal life.” In this sense, it could be said to be the symbol of a truly radical form of cross-species universality, of a state of vulnerability and want that we share equally with ducks, lemurs, iguanas and tuna. At the same time, though, it is impossible to ignore the extent to which it has functioned as a, or perhaps *the*, figure of human exceptionalism, of the way of living that is “proper” to the human being. As a part of the evolutionary narrative which climaxes with the emergence of *homo sapiens* some 500,000 years ago, the face does not only serve to demonstrate humanity’s phylogenetic roots in a relatively undifferentiated order of “life”, but also offers a series of points of divergence on the way to the moment where the human is produced from the animal as a magician pulls a rabbit from a hat – the emergence of the mammal from the synapsid, the primate from the mammal, the genus *homo* from the primate, and finally, of course, of the species *sapiens* from the genus *homo*.

With respect to the face’s morphology, we can plot these transitions along several axes. Beginning with the early mammalian face, we can trace the loss of hair, the reduction of the muzzle and the closing of the space between the eyes that altogether characterise the emergence of the primates, processes which not only move us closer to the development of a recognisably humanoid face, but also signify the evolution of what we would retrospectively define as specifically human faculties.[[35]](#footnote-35) The loss of hair and the articulation of the mimetic muscles facilitates facial expressivity; changes in the throat and mouth enable language; more narrowly spaced eyes allow for stereoscopic vision, which is in turn a necessary condition of tool use and other complex manual activities. These phenomena are in turn indissociable from the shift from quadrupedal to bipedal movement, the growth, both in relative size and complexity, of the brain, and the evolution of the technical, mnemonic and linguistic prostheses through which the human would be delivered to the world. As Bernard Stiegler puts it, “erect posture determines a new system of relations between these two poles of the “anterior field”: the “freeing” of the hand during locomotion is also that of the face from its grasping functions. The hand will necessarily call for tools, movable organs; the tools of the hand will necessarily call for the language of the face.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

All of these factors can be gathered together, however, and expressed in terms of the relationship between the face and the brain. Both language and tool use depend upon the process of corticalization, wherein brain functions migrate from the sub-cortical areas to cortex, which allows for a greater degree of conscious control. This requires an increase in brain mass, which has a knock-on effect on the facial structure. As Wilkins explains, “the human forehead exists because the brain pushes the frontal bones of the neurocranium forward to create a wall above the face.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Meanwhile, the psychologists Bruce and Young describe how “[t]he horizontal positioning of the smell receptors (within the ‘olfactory bulbs’ of the brain) is itself a consequence of the size of the brain in humans compared to other mammals. The large size of the human brain has forced the olfactory bulbs to rotate downwards, and this has had a significant impact on the shape of the human face, which is arranged vertically rather than horizontally.”[[38]](#footnote-38) In brief, the increased size of the human brain is implicated both in the development of the relatively high forehead and the reduction in facial prognathism that differentiates *homo sapiens* from its fellow hominids.

The issue with this origin story has always been one of priority. Did some pre-existing mental capacity provoke the proto-human to shape flint into rudimentary tools, or did this capacity, as it were, evolve out of the stone itself, through a more or less accidental process of trial and error? Does language grow out of gesture and expression? If so, then what precipitated the latter? When each new term we introduce can serve as both the genesis and the terminus of all the others, how are we to determine succession? In *Technics and Time*, Stiegler attempts to communicate the maddening circularity of this problem, demonstrating the impossibility of discovering whether interior (humanity’s mental and psychological capacities) precedes exterior (the development of tools, language etc) or the other way around:

Now, this interiority is nothing outside of its exteriorization: the issue is therefore neither that of an interiority nor that of exteriority – but that of an originary complex in which the two terms, far from being opposed, compose with one another and by the same token are posed, in a single stroke, in a single movement. Neither one precedes the other, neither is the origin of the other, the origin being then the coming into adequacy [*convenance*] or simultaneously arrival of the two – which are in truth the same considered from two different points of view.[[39]](#footnote-39)

“The passage [into humanity],” he wryly concludes, “is a mirage.”[[40]](#footnote-40) There is no foundation for the origins of the human subject which does not itself presuppose some anterior process, into which the myth of its primordial authenticity dwindles like a beam of light shone into a dark pit. It at the site of this ontological crisis, I suggest, that the face emerges as what David Wills would call “a technology of the human itself.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

**The Face as a Technology of the Human Itself**

Before we get any further into this idea, however, it must first of all be acknowledged that to define the face as a “technology of the human itself” is something of a counter-intuitive manoeuvre, since Wills initially developed the concept (in his book *Dorsality*) with regards to the back:

It is in the human back as the spinal — or can we already say dorsal? — turn or adjustment, the primary or primal vertebral articulation that frees the hands to pick up stones and fashion tools, that redistributes the weight of the head and jaw to allow the brain to develop and the tongue to speak. From and in its beginning, back where it began, the human is therefore receiving a definition from a technologization of the body, in a becoming-prosthesis or a *becoming-dorsal.*

The back, Wills argues, represents the disavowed technological origin of “natural man,” a kind of ontological blind-spot that frustrates any attempt to ground the figure of the human in transcendental biological criteria. Humanity is born through this “turning” into language and technicity, a movement which can never fundamentally be grasped because no matter how contort ourselves it will always remain behind or “in back” of us, outside of the “frontal visual perspective of the knowable.”[[42]](#footnote-42) For this reason, dorsality “cannot be part of the human self-image; it comes at the human from behind, is already at its back. Or indeed, in its back.”[[43]](#footnote-43) It signifies, as Wills puts it, “a relation between *bios* and *tekhne* so complex and so historic that any priority of one over the other can be sustained only by means to an appeal to a metaphysics of creation.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

It is evidently part of Wills’ agenda to undermine the prestige of the face both as a self-evident image of “natural man” and as the seat of the visual sense, and therefore the locus of the “frontal visual perspective of the knowable.” Frontality, for Wills, means the fetishisation of vision, action and capability over and against the tactility, passivity and vulnerability implied by the dorsal. Insofar as it is seen as the embodiment of this frontality, the face symbolises precisely the ontological fallacy that Wills is attempting to critique – the idea that “the human” is a self-evident, natural concept which can be grasped, brought before our eyes in its wholeness, and therefore used as the solid ground of our ethics, our politics, our philosophy. As a part of this critique, he enters into a respectful if still somewhat antagonistic reading of the concept of the face in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Without wanting to pre-empt a more detailed analysis of Levinas (which will be here shortly), Wills’ point is that the priority accorded the face in Levinas’ system (as the locus of the encounter with the other and the site of the ethical injunction) actually masks its dependency on a dorsal structure. Simply put, the frontality of the face would not be possible without a “behind” to prop it up. This “behindness” would be logically prior to the face, but with a priority that could never be grasped precisely by virtue of the fact that it remains “in back.” The face, therefore, stands for a presence whose transparency is dependent upon suppressing the obscure *mise-en-abyme* on which it is predicated.

I don’t wish to quibble with Wills’ general reading of Levinas, which is salutary in many respects, or to displace the useful concept of dorsality. What I would suggest, however, is that his desire to subvert the traditional privileges of frontality has tended to lead him towards a simplified account of what the face can be and how it relates to the idea of the human. To be sure, we will in the course of this project see many instances wherein the face is made to stand for the wholeness and transparency of the human subject and the valorisation of the frontal perspective. At the same time, we have already established the grounds upon which it can also be seen as the constitutive blind spot both of frontal vision and subject-formation. The face is, in an irreducibly fundamental sense, averted from the human subject. To this extent, it deserves just as much as the back to be recognized as a part of the body that refuses to be incorporated into the human’s self-image. Seen this way, it becomes an exemplary instance of the “prosthetic” function that Wills is so keen to annex exclusively to the dorsal. For Wills, the relation between the figure of the human and the “originary technology” of the back is defined by what he calls the “dorsal turn.”[[45]](#footnote-45) This is a double entendre. It signifies first of all the “the spinal…turn or adjustment, the primary or primal vertebral articulation that frees the hands to pick up stones and fashion tools, that redistributes the weight of the head and jaw to allow the brain to develop and the tongue to speak,” and therefore the birth of the human as a bipedal, tool-using, linguistic creature. Secondly, it refers to the constant torsion manifested in the basic act of walking, as the spine is rotated this way and that:

Technology as mechanicity is located – not for the first time but in a particularly explicit way, that is to say, as fundamental relation to the earth as exteriority – in the step. In walking one, the human, any given biped, is with each step correcting its bearing, limping from one foot to the other, realigning its center of gravity, compensating for the disequilibrium of each movement, as it were turning one way then the other in order to advance.[[46]](#footnote-46)

As we walk, we rehearse the “dorsal turn,” the primordial gesture which both establishes the human and locates its origin behind and outside of itself. We turn repeatedly towards the back as if to capture it within our field of vision, but in the same motion it turns away, a moment of ontological slapstick that sums up humanity’s sad lot – to grope forever for an essence that it must structurally be denied.

As far as Wills is concerned, the face is in fact a façade, a two-dimensional frontage propped up and lent the illusion of depth by the dorsal. This analysis is incomplete, though, insofar as it ignores the fact that the dorsal turn, the turn towards the back, is also always implicitly a turn towards the front and therefore the face. And no matter how we contort ourselves, the face, just as much as the back, always remains outside of our field of vision. The “facial turn”, as it were, establishes the human as the “political animal”, defining its unique ontological privilege in terms of its capacity for higher intelligence, language, deep feeling and complex relationships. In so doing, however, it locates the essence of this human figure outside of itself. The face that turns away from the individual and towards the other is also oriented away from the human subject and towards the social world. In the same moment that it seems to describe the properties that characterise the human as such, the facial turn suggests that these properties are not to be found “in” the human as a set of inherent capabilities but rather displaces them onto an intersubjective relation that remains always before it. We could say, to adapt a phrase of Wills, that the face represents a relation between self and sociality so complex and historic that any priority of one over the other can be sustained only by means of an appeal to a metaphysics of creation.

The face is always before the subject. It precedes it spatially and pre-exists it temporally, such that, as Watson says, the self is always trying to catch up to the “certainties” that the face “has already put into motion.”[[47]](#footnote-47) This insight complicates the notion that the face expresses or reveals something which already exists “inside” or “behind” it. As Stiegler puts it, “there is no exteriorization that does not point to a movement from interior to exterior. Nevertheless, the interior is inverted in this movement; it can therefore not precede it. Interior and exterior are consequently constituted in a movement that invents both one and the other: a moment in which they invent each other respectively…”[[48]](#footnote-48) Whatever we see “in” the face – a person, an emotion, an intention – cannot be simply a property internal to it, because it is only through the friction between internality and externality that these meanings arise in the first place. Across the face’s surface, significations traverse the space between the outer world of sociality, context and history and the inner world of consciousness and affect in a continuous loop, twisting the body like a Möbius strip, confounding the distinction between inside and out. The subject is blind to what takes place on its face, and cannot therefore claim privileged access to its significance. There is no homunculus beneath to which the forms and meanings of a face can be ascribed in advance. But by the same token, these meanings cannot simply be imposed from without, precisely because of this dislocation between the face about which we speculate and the person to which it refers. It is only by presupposing the subject as the transcendental origin of the face’s meanings that we can with any confidence make assertions about what it is showing and telling us. Otherwise, the face of the other escapes us just as inevitably as our own.

**“The Tragicomedy of Appearance”**

To presuppose the subject-face relation is to deny the face its fundamental property – to be a point of indeterminacy and a site of negotiation between the internal and the external. Agamben calls this dynamic, “the tragicomedy of appearance”, by which he means to communicate the following:

[The] face uncovers only and precisely inasmuch as it hides, and hides to the extent to which it uncovers. In this way the appearance that ought to have manifested human beings becomes for them instead a resemblance that betrays them and in which they can no longer recognize themselves. Precisely because the face is solely the location of truth, it is also and immediately the location of simulation and of an irreducible impropriety.[[49]](#footnote-49)

The “tragicomedy” of this situation is that, as confluence between inside and out, the face marks the threshold of the communicable, the point at which the properties which define the human as such are made intelligible. At the very same time, however, it is also the point at which these properties are placed beyond the scope of subjective perception, becoming impossible to grasp prior to their technicity and their sociality. Agamben continues:

My face is my *outside*: a point of indifference with respect to all of my properties, with respect to what is properly one's own and what is common, to what is internal and what is external. In the face, I exist with all of my properties (my being brown, tall, pale, proud, emotional...); but this happens without any of these properties essentially identifying me or belonging to me. The face is the threshold of de-propriation and of de-identification of all manners and of all qualities – a threshold in which only the latter become purely communicable. And only where I find a face do I encounter an exteriority and does an *outside* happen to me.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Every meaning that we seek to apply to a face is bifurcated by this indeterminacy. For example, when I register the emotion in another’s face, in what sense is it “their feeling” that I’m seeing? Don’t I read my own desires and intentions, my own emotional state into them? And more fundamentally, am I not to some unascertainable degree the cause and the origin of this emotion that supposedly emerges from within them? Or, to take the case of identity, does this concept not simultaneously describe the identification from without that is imposed upon an individual by their society and their peers *and* the subject’s own identification (or refusal to identify) with this social persona? The face is the bodily site upon which these problems are endlessly re-raised and worked over – in Agamben’s words, “a point of indifference…with respect to what is properly one’s own and what is common, to what is internal and what is external.”[[51]](#footnote-51) The face ought to be the proof of everything, but it settles nothing. Just where you would expect to find confirmation of everything pertaining to the human, we encounter only the most radical doubts. Resemblance/difference, human/animal, truth/lie, expression/impassivity, stasis/mobility – each of these binaries is twisted beyond distinction the moment it comes into contact with its non-Euclidean geometry. The face’s deepest revelation, then, might be to show that its meanings are nothing more than the evidence of this constant struggle as it plays out across its topography.

Because humans neither are nor have to be any essence, any nature, or any specific destiny, their condition is the most empty and the most insubstantial of all: it is the truth. What remains hidden from them is not something behind appearance, but rather appearance itself, that is, their being nothing other than a face.[[52]](#footnote-52)

For Agamben, to be “nothing other than a face” entails reconciling oneself to the face’s incommensurability to the subject and accepting its refusal to be integrated into the human self-image. This in turn means welcoming an existence without a destiny, becoming a creature without essence, an unfoundationed life. By the same token, the act of giving a face to the human being may be an attempt to restore to it its destiny – that is, to encapsulate the qualities which define the human in a single vision of ontological completeness, such that it becomes possible to envision what Étienne Balibar calls “the imaginary face-to-face relation between man and his origins.”[[53]](#footnote-53) The moment the face is called upon to characterise the native properties of the human subject, it becomes a tool that can be used not only to distinguish the human from the nonhuman, but also to orient all subjects relative to its totalising ideal.

**Myths of Protraction**

This is the role that the face plays, for instance, in Peter Sloterdijk’s “microsphereological” account of human ontology. He writes:

The possibility of *faciality* is connected to the process of anthropogenesis itself. The drawing out of human faces from the snouts of mammals: this points to a facial and interfacial drama whose beginnings extend back into the early history of the species. A glance at the facial forms of those apes most closely related to humans shows that they too, from afar, are on the way to a quasi-human faciality, even though they have scarcely covered half of the evolutionary distance between the mammal’s head and the human face. We refer to this biologically and culturally motivated setting apart of human faces from animal faces as *protraction*.[[54]](#footnote-54)

The face, for Sloterdijk, is the herald of anthropogenesis, which he straightforwardly defines as a “setting apart” of the human from the animal. What he calls the process of “protraction” is pictured as a continuous morphing of the facial profile, beginning with the mammalian muzzle and then progressing geometrically through the straightening contours of the hominid apes until we arrive at the divine verticality of the human. This is a signal instance of what philosopher Mary Midgley calls the “Escalator Fallacy” – to wit, “the idea that evolution is a steady, linear upward movement, a single inexorable process of improvement.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Not only does this trope invert the evolutionary trajectory by presupposing the human as the *telos* towards which the process was always directed, it is also, as Midgley explains, perfectly contradictory to Darwin’s own notion of the development of life as a kind of bush, with innumerable branches spreading simultaneously in all different directions. This image was specifically calculated to imply no ultimate evolutionary teleology or hierarchical distinction between species (we might, using a different register, say that Darwin proposed a “rhizomatic”, rather than an “arboreal” model of evolution).

Sloterdijk’s “protraction”, on the other hand, maps itself directly onto the cliched image of Man’s ascent out of apelike prostration, from the stooping chimp to the upright *sapiens*. The ordering principle behind this concept is not, however, a phylogenetic lineage so much as an ontological hierarchy that places a certain historically specific definition of the human on top and calculates the value of all other life-forms relative to it. Indeed, for Sloterdijk, “protraction” is not fundamentally a biological phenomenon. Rather, it traces a millennia-long ontological curve whose trajectory encompasses both the genetic and morphological transformations described by evolutionary theory and a cultural history of facial representations based on the Western tradition of portraiture. “It is not,” he declares, “the portrait that elevates faces to the threshold of portrayability in an open-ended facio-genetic process. Protraction is the clearing [*lichtung*] of being in the face; it invites us to conceive of the history of being as a somatic event.” This is chilling. Sloterdijk begins by identifying the “clearing” of being – that is, the Heideggerean notion of the lighted space in which it is possible for *dasein* (that mode of ‘being-there’ that is particular to humans) to appear as such – with the morphological characteristics of the human face as distinguished from the ape. This furnishes him with a set of criteria according to which a face can be closer to or further away from human-ness, criteria which he proceeds to project onto the human as a historical, rather than a biological creature. His suggestion, essentially, is that the developing tradition of Western portraiture, from the devotional images of the Middle Ages through the realistic depiction of individuals which began with the Renaissance is a direct “facio-genetic” continuation of the phylogenetic process by which human features emerged from the face of the anthropoid ape.[[56]](#footnote-56) What he characterises as the “species-wide, open *sapiens* face” is in fact not any human face, but specifically that which was produced by this tradition.

The grim conclusion towards which this logic tends is made perfectly clear in his reading of Giotto’s *Kiss of Judas*, which juxtaposes the harmonious vertical lines of Christ’s visage with the beetle-browed, sloping countenance of his betrayer. This image, says Sloterdijk, “tears open the anthropological continuum between the persons [i.e. Christ and Judas] in three ways and assigns them to radically divergent ranks and places of being,” demonstrating its artist to be “the painter of anthropological difference.” The “three ways” to which he refers are, 1) the contrast between “God-man” and “mere-man”, 2) between the “apollonized”, heroic Christ and Judas as “sly Eastern plebeian with base drives and disharmonic features” and 3) between Christ’s “open, sphere-forming power that would even reintegrate the traitor into its space if he were able to enter it” and Judas’ “greedy isolation” and his “obscene gesture of one who infiltrates the space of love with the attitude of one who does not belong.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Judas and Christ are fixed in their respective places on an “anthropological continuum” that is both open-ended and strictly graduated, simultaneously biophysical and cultural, and that explicitly refers to a contrast between the noble “Hellenic” West and the degenerate East. The distinctions which, Sloterdijk assumes, so self-evidently separate animal from Man are implicitly reproduced within the category of “the human” itself, forming the basis of an ontological hierarchy that can be indexed directly to the features of the face, most especially its “apollonized” verticality.

In essence, “protraction” is nothing more than a recapitulation of the theory of the “facial angle,” a familiar trope of nineteenth-century racial science and eugenics. The technical details have tended to vary, but the facial angle is basically a measurement of facial prognathism. For instance, in the work of its originator, the Dutch anthropologist Petrus Camper, it was based on the angle created by a vertical line “traced from the front of the incisor teeth…to the prominent part of the forehead” intersected with a horizontal line “drawn from the nosebase to the earhole.”[[58]](#footnote-58) By assessing the skulls of different animals, the members of various human “races” and a selection of Greco-Roman statues, he developed a scale ranging from “the African tailed monkey” (42°) and the orangutan (58°), through the “Angolan and the Kalmuck” (70°) to the “European” (80°) and finally the Roman (85°-90°) and Greek statues (100°). The point of the exercise, so far as Camper was concerned, was twofold – first, to demonstrate the unity of the human as a biological category (in contrast to the theories of contemporary anthropologists, who tended to assert that Sub-Saharan Africans and Europeans were not part of the same species), and second, to discover a quantifiable physical variable according to which the various races of humanity could be distinguished. For each racial group, there was a bandwidth of ten or so degrees – a “maximum or minimum of comeliness” as he put it – within the face of a normal constituent was supposed to fall.[[59]](#footnote-59) At the high end of this mini-scale, as it were, we find the best examples of the forms of beauty specific to each category. To this extent, Camper was a relativist. Taken as a whole, however, the facial angle was meant to denote proximity to the Platonic form of “the beautiful in itself,” an ideal which “does not depend upon external circumstances, or mere opinion.”[[60]](#footnote-60) This is why Camper saw no problem with populating the upper reaches of his register with works of art, rather than the skulls of actual Greeks or Romans. The ideal was, as he saw it, “not in nature”[[61]](#footnote-61) – he believed instead, in accordance with the then extremely popular aesthetic theory of Winckelmann, that the classical artists had possessed a superior awareness of the laws of proportional conformity in which the secret of transcendent beauty was to be located.[[62]](#footnote-62) Hence, although each race represented in Camper’s system demonstrated a unique kind of beauty proper to its particular form, there was simultaneously an absolute sequence which placed the European face closer to the Hellenic archetype whilst situating the Asian and the African next-door to the ape.

Recent revisionists such as Meijer have pointed out that both Camper’s published texts and his correspondence show that he was, by the standards of his time, an egalitarian humanist who was on the right side of most contemporary debates in his field. In fact, he claimed that his work on the facial angle was designed to demonstrate that the facial characteristics of non-European peoples were based upon natural morphological principles, as opposed to the theories of many of his peers, who asserted, for instance, that the features of black Africans were the product of postnatal deformities inflicted by their “primitive” childcare methods.[[63]](#footnote-63) However, the extreme popularity of the facial angle amongst racial theorists whose conclusions were the polar opposite of Camper’s professed beliefs is proof enough that his enlightened arguments did not necessarily follow directly from the model which was supposed to demonstrate them.

Such was the ease with which his “discovery” was repurposed by the most rabid apologists for slavery, apartheid and empire that Camper’s liberalism has been drowned by the tides of history, whilst the facial angle itself is remembered as a repellent logo of scientific racism. As early as 1801, the French naturalist Julien-Joseph Virey could write that “[man owes] his intelligence…to the mass of his brain. The brain is considerably larger in man than in other animals, but grows smaller in inferior races, like the Negro, as the jaws grow longer and form a sharper angle, as in herbivorous species.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Virey’s crucial tweak was to read the facial angle as an index of cranial capacity, and therefore intelligence. What was for Camper an exclusively aesthetic scale was thus extrapolated into a cognitive hierarchy, and it was this formulation of the theory which would pass into the iconography of race science. Some fifty years later, this augmented version of the facial angle was still current, as evidenced by Herbert Spencer’s reference to it in his essay “Personal Beauty”:

[T]he simultaneous protrusion of the brain and recession of the jaws, which among lower animals has accompanied increase of skill and sagacity, has continued during the advance of Humanity from barbarism to civilization; and has been throughout, the result of a discipline involving the increase of mental power. And so it becomes manifest that there exists an organic relationship between that protuberance of the jaws which we consider ugly, and a certain inferiority of nature.[[65]](#footnote-65)

In its extension of the evolutionary trajectory into the history of human culture and the elision of physical appearance and intelligence or virtue, Spencer’s argument here is essentially indistinguishable from Sloterdijk’s “protraction.” Without making any suggestions about their respective political ideologies, part of the basis of this similarity is surely their common deployment of the face as a trope of the human. In both cases, it is the job of the face to stand in for a set of what Balibar calls “anthropological universals,” that is, putatively constant characteristics of human existence, whether on a psychological, genetic, biological or cultural level.[[66]](#footnote-66) Their actual contents, in fact, are entirely fungible – we have seen already that the same basic narrative of the face’s morphological development can be related equally to ideas of beauty, intelligence or even the Heideggerean *dasein*. What is important is the underlying structure whereby certain facial characteristics are identified as the physical indices of whatever “universal” is at stake, and then used as the basis to divide the human into a set of distinct categories distributed along a single continuous scale.

By means of a strategy that is part rhetorical (an argument about what and how the face can mean) and part representational (a style of depiction which centres certain aspects of the face as meaningful whilst minimising or erasing others), both Sloterdijk and Camper seek to preserve the face as a general signifier both of “life itself” and of the human whilst also using it as the basis of a series of graduated distinctions internal to that set. Faces are therefore obliged to serve a double function – on the one hand, to mark the outer boundaries of the category of the universal, and on the other, to yield criteria according to which all the constituents of that category can be distinguished and ranked. The facial angle represents this principle reduced to the utmost degree of mathematical economy – a single numerical value simultaneously places the individual with regards to the overall class (i.e. the human) and the hierarchy according to which the class is ordered (i.e. race). “Protraction,” meanwhile, recasts this geometric sequence as an evolutionary-cultural-historical narrative, wherein we can imagine the gradual morphing of the mammalian muzzle into the upright countenance of the “apollonized” Christ.

“Theoretical racism,” writes Balibar, “represents the ideal synthesis of transformation and fixity, of repetition and destiny. The ‘secret’, the discovery of which it endlessly rehearses, is that of a humanity eternally leaving animality behind and eternally threatened with falling into the grasp of animality.” This is the little evolutionary drama we see played out again and again in a system such as Sloterdijk’s or Camper’s. The face becomes the site of a “search for criteria by which men can be said to be ‘men’…*anthropological universals*…notions of ‘humanity’s genetic inheritance’ or ‘cultural tradition.’”[[67]](#footnote-67) In this context, it attains a function which straddles the divide between bio- and necropolitics, a criterion according to which the right to life may be distributed in varying degrees.[[68]](#footnote-68) It must be stressed – this is simultaneously an inclusive and an exclusive gesture. Insofar as being is understood to have a face, it is encompassed within a general ontological hierarchy according to which its properties and entitlements can be ascertained. In this sense, recognition does not necessarily constitute a beneficent gesture. It may well be that one is granted a face only in order to be identified as the *homo sacer* – the “life that cannot be sacrificed yet may, nevertheless, be killed.”[[69]](#footnote-69)

This ought to give us some indication of the necessary political orientation of a genealogy of the face-technology relation. In order to respond to the necropolitical mythos of “the imaginary face-to-face relation between man and his origins,” it is essential to stress, on the one hand, the irreducible technicity of the face in all of its specific instantiations, and on the other, the fundamentally tragicomic dynamic which undermines any attempt to make it the foundation of an ontology of the human as such. Our work must therefore consist of two main efforts – to provide a critique of accounts of the face which attempt to conceal the root of its meanings in systems of technological mediation, but also simultaneously to suggest alternative conceptions of the face which may allow us to elude or resist the violence exercised in its name. It remains for the final part of this introduction to evaluate the existing theoretical tools which might avail us in this effort.

**The Face of the Other**

For the past forty or so years, two philosophical approaches have tended to dominate the way that the humanities have approached the subject of the human face. The first model is that of Emmanuel Levinas, formulated most fully in his 1961 work *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (first translated into English in 1969). The second emerges from the thought of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, particularly the essay “Year Zero: Faciality” from their *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). The two theories are at first glance perfectly antithetical, working with contrasting presuppositions about what faces can do, and arriving at totally opposing conclusions as to their ethical and political valence. Subsequent theorists of the face are consequently presented with a difficult, if potentially productive problem. The antagonism between these projects cannot be ignored, and any attempt to reconcile them risks dulling their more provocative points. They must therefore be opposed, in their most extreme formulations. Any subsequent theory of the face will be built out of the wreckage that remains.

Since Levinas has chronological priority, I’ll come to him first. The theory of the human face, or perhaps more properly of the face-to-face encounter, laid out throughout Levinas’ work is contentious, counterintuitive, often infuriating and frequently misunderstood. It needs to be grasped, first of all, in the context of Levinas’ broader philosophical project, which can be summarised by his famous slogan, “ethics as first philosophy.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Quite simply, the task to which Levinas commits himself throughout the scope of his writing is to argue that the inaugural, *a priori* questions which must be settled in order for philosophical discourse to begin are not problems of knowledge, or being, but of ethics, of how to live in a world that is fundamentally social. In *Totality and Infinity*, this project takes the form of a polemic against the idea of “totality”, which term Tom Sparrow usefully glosses as “shorthand for any closed system which leaves no room for radical alterity.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

A totalising system attempts to conform all its elements to a set of common values. This was, Levinas believed, a tendency which had shaped Western philosophy since its inception. In a series of interviews published in 2011, he argues that:

Knowledge has always been interpreted as assimilation. Even the most surprising discoveries end by being absorbed, comprehended, with all that there is of “prehending” in “comprehending.” The most audacious and remote knowledge does not put us in communion with the truly other; it does not take the place of sociality; it is still and always a solitude.[[72]](#footnote-72)

So, our knowledge is inevitably perverted by the capacities through which it is generated (perception, reason, subjectivity). Levinas’ problem with this condition is not, however, epistemological, but ethical. His concern is for how the process of “comprehending” might constrain or deform the other by subjecting it to its measurements.

Let’s take a more concrete example, one that Levinas found himself in dialogue with throughout his early work – the Heideggerean system of ontology. Heidegger’s thought consists of an attempt to describe the manifold structures of being, from the “present-at-hand” nature of inert objects to *Dasein*, “that entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue.”[[73]](#footnote-73) According to Heidegger, *Dasein* is “thrown” into the world, and must learn how to survive and ultimately to realize itself by reaching out, appropriating the objects it needs and turning them to its own projects – hence the prominence of tools and the lexicon of “coping” and “ready-to-hand” within the Heideggerean argot.

Levinas had several objections to Heidegger’s account of being, and his debate with his old master is far too complex to be summarised here. For our purposes, what is important is to understand Levinas’ objection to ontology *tout court*, which is that any philosophy which begins by giving an account of the positive contents of being founds itself in an act of violence, as Sparrow explains: “[by] forcing every being to conform to a single system, ontology necessarily does violence to whatever resists enclosure, whether by referring its singularity to a general form or by excluding it as nonsensical.”[[74]](#footnote-74) This violence, it must be stressed, is not merely symbolic. Levinas opens *Totality and Infinity* with this alarming proposition: “The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

The philosophical violence which inaugurates ontology is, then, the foundation of the violence of total war. So far as Levinas is concerned, the danger of totalizing systems is that they exclude the “absolutely Other” from their system of values, thereby rendering it dispensable, killable. The brutal struggles between nations and peoples which Levinas, as a Lithuanian Jew who enlisted in the French army and was taken as a prisoner of war in 1940, lived through directly were, he believed, extrapolations of the kind of thinking demonstrated in the work of Heidegger, not to mention Western philosophy more generally. The stakes of his project could hardly be more momentous: “to know whether we are not duped by morality.”[[76]](#footnote-76) His desire, in the face of the systematic everyday slaughters of the twentieth century, was to overthrow the philosophical priority of totality and ontology, and to replace them with an account of the ethical relationship between free subjectivities.

As the title of his text suggests, Levinas sought to oppose the powers of totality with “infinity.” Infinity is the secret shame of all totalizing systems – it is everything that the system excludes by virtue of its own parameters. Of course, any system must have a limit, and therefore an exterior which gestures towards infinity. But this is not quite Levinas’ point. What he wants to claim is that as much as infinity transcends totality, it is still “reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Moreover, he aims to demonstrate that infinity is not simply an excess implied by totality, but is in fact prior and foundational to it. That is, in order to arrive at a totality, we must first have passed through the idea of infinity. The means through which he attempts to demonstrate these positions, as well as to bind them to the idea of ethics, is through a phenomenology (or perhaps an anti-phenomenology) of the face-to-face encounter.

The fastest way to understand what Levinas means by a face-to-face encounter is to dispense with the assumptions which have governed our commonplace understanding of the face under Western modernity. So, all at once: the face is not an index of familiarity, we do not simply recognise or “know” people by their faces. Faces do not reveal to us the thoughts and feelings of other people. The primary functions of the face are not to fix identity or produce expression. The face should not be related in the first instance to the self. Or, perhaps, the face does and is all of the things rejected above, but if that is the extent of our understanding of it, then we have missed its most important characteristics.

The face in Levinas is first of all the site of an awesome and terrible weirdness that totalising ontologies have taught us to forget – the “absolutely other…the Stranger [*l’Etranger*] who disturbs the being at home with oneself…the free one,” the sign that “[the] collectivity in which I say “you” or “we” is not a plural of the “I.””[[78]](#footnote-78) Looking into the face of this Other, I do not re-cognize it in the sense of grasping an idea that existed pre-formed in my mind (think of Levinas’ notion of “all there is of “prehending” in “comprehending.””) I do not receive it as something that I can assimilate within the totality of my knowledge or my being. Rather, the face confronts me with its irreducible ipseity, its I-ness, so manifestly ensconced at the heart of its own world of sensation, affect and intentionality that it cannot be reduced to the status of an object within mine. I am faced by a being which can think, feel and act totally independently of my own thought, feeling and action. In this way, the face of the Other displaces the ontological centrality of the I.

The paradox that Levinas describes is this: the face of the Other appears to me within my field of vision, as a perceptual object which I should be able to submit to my knowledge. And yet it resists this submission as no other object can:

The relation with the face, with the absolutely other which I can not contain, the other in this sense infinite, is nonetheless my Idea, a commerce. But the relation is maintained without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity. The "resistance" of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical.[[79]](#footnote-79)

The resistance of the face is the resistance of the infinite to the powers of totalization. In the constant agitation of the eyes, the yawning dark of the mouth and the perpetual motion of the expressive musculature, I perceive the production of a sign system which I can and do attempt to read. But just as much as these signs provide clues as to the subject which expresses them, they are also the source of a constant anxious uncertainty (here, Levinas’ thought is clearly the foundation for Agamben’s “tragicomedy of appearance”). What is it feeling, or thinking? What does it want? What is its stance with regard to me? The insistence with which the face poses these kinds of questions awakens me to the illimitable extent of my ignorance of the Other’s being.

The face doesn’t simply hint at what I could know of the Other if I only had the time to ask it the correct questions. On the contrary: it demonstrates what will always remain structurally unknowable to me, precisely because it is incommensurable to the powers of perception, cognition and reason upon which I would base my knowledge. In this sense, it is marked simultaneously by negativity and by excess, producing an overload of significations (looks, expressions) without ever fully disclosing the being to which these significations refer. In this way, the face turns the powers of the I against themselves, revealing their insufficiency when confronted by the radical incommensurability of the Other. It is precisely from this incommensurability, structural to the face-to-face encounter, that the experience of infinity is derived. However sensitive or acute my idea of the Other might be, the face confronts me with what will always exceed and transcend it.

It is in this sense that it is proper to think of *Totality and Infinity* as a work of anti-phenomenology. For whilst Levinas’ tools and methodology are those of the phenomenologist, his aim is to show the point at which phenomenology breaks down, where it is confronted by something it cannot contain. As Levinas puts it:

I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes!...The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face cannot be reduced to that.[[80]](#footnote-80)

This stipulation is crucial to the coherence of Levinas’ proposition. If the face is truly the site of the “absolutely Other”, then it follows that it cannot be reduced to a set of positive contents, a particular arrangement of features or distribution of luminance. We cannot anticipate where and how it might appear to us. I am never prepared for the arrival of the face; it bursts unbidden into my world, attenuating my capacities and upsetting my prerogatives. For the I, the face-to-face encounter must be an irruptive, bewildering and even frightening event – a confrontation with a strangeness that resists all my attempts to domesticate it.

Levinas therefore demands that we consider the face, not in terms of properties or capacities, but as a relation. In order to think the face, therefore, we must consider how it is produced as an effect of a particular kind of relationship between the I and the Other. It is here that the ethical valence of Levinas’ thought comes fully into view. The face of the Other ruptures the phenomenological sphere of the I and calls its powers into question by revealing their incommensurability with the infinite. The affect appropriate to this experience is shame. As Levinas puts it, “my arbitrary freedom reads its shame in the eyes that look at me.”[[81]](#footnote-81) Met with the face of the Other, the I recognises the ignorance and violence upon which its freedom (the freedom to know, to appropriate, to assimilate) had been based.

In this way the face of the Other calls the I out of itself, out of the solipsistic state that Levinas calls “enjoyment”, the instinctual contentment that arises from carrying out the basic necessities of living. Enjoyment is the foundation of “the individuation, the auto-personification, the substantatialization, and the independence of the self,”[[82]](#footnote-82) and yet it remains totally egoistic, without the dignity typically afforded the term “subjectivity.” If the human remained within the sphere of enjoyment, then it would be no more than a husk, a golem. “Interiority”, Levinas argues, “must be at the same time closed and open. The possibility of rising from the animal condition is assuredly thus described.”[[83]](#footnote-83) It is only through the openness to the Other, manifested in the form of the face-to-face encounter, that this rising from mere phenomenality to true being can occur:

It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself. This does not mean that my existence is constituted in the thought of the others. An existence called objective, such as is reflected in the thought of the others, and by which I count in universality, in the State, in history, in the totality, does not express me, but precisely dissimulates me. The face I welcome makes me pass from phenomenon to being in another sense: in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response—acuteness of the present—engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Only when faced by the Other is the base, arbitrary freedom of the I opposed to the responsibility that makes freedom truly authentic – the ethical responsibility to the Other. Responsibility, for Levinas, is “the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity…Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility.”[[85]](#footnote-85) That is to say, only through responsibility do the actions of the I acquire any weight, insofar as they are referred to the Other. Without responsibility, there is nothing to bind the subject to its deeds, and hence no self-awareness or self-reflexivity. Autonomy, choice, conscience – none of these putatively intrinsic qualities of the self are possible without responsibility, which must in the first place be bestowed by the other. In this sense, Levinas claims, the subject depends upon the Other for its very existence.

Since the absolutely Other remains unknowable, the extent of my responsibility is likewise inexhaustible. I cannot anticipate what the Other will require of me, and this radical negativity places me under an obligation which I will never be able to satisfy. This is the price of subjecthood:

It is I who support the Other and am responsible for him. One thus sees that in the human subject at the same time as a total subjection, my primogeniture manifests itself. My responsibility is untransferable, no one could replace me. In fact, it is a matter of saying the very identity of the human I starting from responsibility, that is, starting from this position or deposition of the sovereign I in self consciousness, a deposition which is precisely the responsibility for the Other. Responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what, *humanly*, I cannot refuse. This charge is a supreme dignity of the unique. I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky said: “*We are all responsible for all men before all, and I more than all the others*.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

In a wondrous imaginative coup, Levinas makes the very uniqueness of the I dependent upon the relationship to the Other. It is purely through being caught up in the geometry of the face-to-face that the I is denoted as such. Through this interpellation the subject is finally located in this particular body, in this place and time, where the Other calls upon it to answer to its responsibility. It is in this way that Levinas attempts to trump Heidegger, and to reverse the priorities of Western thought – by insisting that prior to any thought of being or subjectivity, we must first consider the relationship of responsibility for the Other.

Levinas captures the foundational nature of the ethical relation in a single dramatic set-piece. When I first turn towards the face of the Other, it is characterised by its “nudity”, its “destitution” and its “vulnerability”. It presents to me a being which seems totally defenceless before my powers. In this way, the presence of the face inaugurates the possibility of violence and murder: “I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power. The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.” At the very same time, the face (as the fount of infinity) is the site of the very opposite injunction:

[He] can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very *unforseeableness* of his reaction. He thus opposes to me not a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole; but the very transcendence of his being by relation to that whole; not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: “you shall not commit murder.” The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other…[[87]](#footnote-87)

By presenting itself simultaneously as the thing which can be killed and the commandment “thou shalt not kill”, the face of the Other confronts the I with a dilemma which inaugurates its subjectivity. The subject’s very first choice, its first step into a realm of authentic freedom, is the decision as to whether it will accept the burden of subjectivity itself: either deny and destroy the Other, and with it the relation of responsibility which actualizes subjectivity, or give oneself over to an absolute obligation, submit to the ordeals of a difficult freedom, and assent to being the “hostage” of the Other, to use one of Levinas’ favourite terms.[[88]](#footnote-88) It is not of course that appropriation, violence and killing are not possible, simply that in order to enact them the I must first have been through this ethical dilemma. In this way, ethics is truly foundational, prior to any ontological condition or “state of nature” out of which violence might be supposed to emerge.

By way of conclusion, there are three specific implications that I want to draw out from Levinas’ account of the face-to-face encounter. First: Levinas identifies the face as a criterion of ethical considerability. That which has a face demands our infinite responsibility, that which has none demands nothing. The face both inaugurates the possibility of violence and the commandment “thou shalt not kill.” That which has no face, therefore, can be killed with impunity. All actions are licensed against it; whatever we inflict upon it, even the most sadistic or painstaking barbarity, cannot even be called violence, since the possibility of violence presupposes the face. In this sense, the face represents the opposite of Giorgio Agamben’s “*homo sacer*” or “bare life,” the being “who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*.”[[89]](#footnote-89) Within a political and social system which has accrued to itself the power to distribute life and death, to have a face is to some extent to be valued, to be recognized as a citizen, and sheltered from the prospect of imminent extermination. For these reasons it is extremely important to attend to the ways in which faces are distributed in discourse, in representation and in practice, and to harp repeatedly on the simple and even banal question of who or what gets to have a face, and who or what does not.

Secondly, and following directly from my previous point: it is impossible to totally prescribe where the face will be found, what form it will take, and what kind of being will exhibit it. Admittedly, this will always remain a contentious point of indeterminacy with regards to Levinas’ text, and he has sometimes seemed unsure himself about where to draw the line, or more importantly, whether such a line is even conceivable. As Matthew Calarco observes, this ambivalence is palpable in the interview “The Paradox of Morality”, in which Levinas admits that “one cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal,” whilst also producing the following remarkable hesitation: “I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called ‘face’. I don’t know if a snake has a face. I can’t answer that question.”[[90]](#footnote-90) Whilst it is true that Levinas’ perplexity here could reflect certain weaknesses or inconsistencies in his thinking, at the same time Calarco is right to stress that this agnosticism is essential to the viability of Levinas’ ethical system:

For the Other to be a genuine and absolute Other – something that Levinas maintains is essential to the ethicality of the encounter – the Other cannot belong to *any* genus whatsoever, not even one as broad as "humanity." So it will not do to simply say that the Other is another human being. Levinas, of course, recognizes this point, and this is why his humanism is not based on a biological or anthropological concept of humanity.[[91]](#footnote-91)

That is to say, once the concept of “face” becomes reduced to a list of positive contents, then Levinas’ theory is no longer an ethics, but rather the potential tool of biopower and eugenics, facilitating the distribution of life and death according to which kinds of being do and do not have faces. As Calarco suggests, then, our infinite responsibility to the Other means that “we are obliged to proceed from the possibility that *anything* might take on a face. And we are further obliged to hold this possibility permanently open.”[[92]](#footnote-92) I would add to this that we are further obliged to be extremely suspicious of any attempts to define the face according to a set of capacities, properties and features, and to scrutinise these rigorously for any signs of how they might work to control the distribution of ethical considerability.

Thirdly, it must be asserted that whilst the face appears within the visual and phenomenological field, its appearance announces the rupturing and the limit-point of vision and phenomenology. Precisely because it is the point at which the infinite is sensed within the visual, it marks decisively the extent of what vision cannot grasp. The face draws the blinds on the “front visual perspective of the knowable;” its essence is to resist specular domination. For this reason, we must always highlight the incompleteness and futility of any attempt to subject the face to visual regimes of knowledge, and especially to the extent that the representational system in question seeks to deny that futility and incompleteness. The assumption that the face can be unproblematically represented, or that it can straightforwardly and transparently instantiate certain qualities about a group or an individual, risks suspending the motion of infinity and hence abrogating the ethical call. Representations of the face must be scrutinized for how they reckon with this fundamental issue.

There is a tendency within contemporary writing on the face to introduce Levinas somewhere towards the end of the work, announcing him belatedly as a kind of white knight whose idealised vision stands as a counterpoint to the oppressive, pessimistic or otherwise problematic versions of the face hitherto discussed. This practice must be questioned and resisted. For all of its self-reflexivity, Levinas’ theory cannot simply be received as innocent, and indeed in some ways it may be accused of reproducing the very structures of domination it proposes to question. If we are to use it, it must be subjected to a searching critique.

The most glaring problem with Levinasian ethics lies in his offensive habit of gendering otherness. For instance, from his essay *Time and the Other*: “the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the *feminine*.”[[93]](#footnote-93) Regardless of the more or less “technical” senses in which this phrase might be understood, it constitutes a serious blow to the usefulness of Levinas’ ethical frameworks, on the basis that a) it uncritically reproduces a tired and oppressive stereotype of the feminine as mystery, as negative, as supplement, indeed as “this sex which is not one”, and b) it threatens to constrain the radical alterity of the Other by attributing to it a set of characteristics, howsoever the contents of the category of “the feminine” are formulated. Simone de Beauvoir dealt with this point in a famously unsparing footnote in the introduction to *The Second Sex*:

I suppose that Levinas does not forget that woman, too, is aware of her own consciousness, or ego. But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man’s point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is a mystery for man. Thus his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege.[[94]](#footnote-94)

This remonstration inaugurated a long-standing debate over the value of Levinas to feminism, in which he has had powerful advocates on both sides of the argument. It is not my purpose here to attempt to adjudicate on this controversy, except to remark that it is from the feminist critique of Levinas that we learn how best to engage with his philosophy – which is to say, sceptically and pragmatically, with an eye for its practical implications for the advancement of liberatory struggle.[[95]](#footnote-95)

As I mentioned above, Levinas’ theory implies a system according to which faces, and therefore the right to ethical consideration, are distributed. And yet this system is never named or analysed within his text. There are reasons why this should be so. Firstly, Levinas describes his project explicitly as a “defence of subjectivity.”[[96]](#footnote-96) He is on the side of the particular, the irreducible and the contingent, against the systematic, the general and the structural. Politics is aligned with totality, which in his anarchism Levinas is determined to depreciate. Secondly, Levinas is committed to the position that the emergence of the face is totally unforeseeable. To admit that this emergence could be conditioned by external factors would seem to submit his theory once more to the power of totality, thus undermining his entire project. Together, these tendencies help to account for his inability to address the prospect of an economy in which the face, or the possibility of its emergence, is distributed according to the prerogatives of power.

The problems raised by this wilful blindness, however, mean that it is ultimately an unconscionable trade-off. It is not simply that Levinas’ theory has nothing to say about the role that the face might potentially play in the biopolitical regulation of life and death, or the notion that different faces may be marked with the signs of privilege or odium within a particular hierarchy. More insidiously, Levinasian discourse may actually reinforce these systems by positing the face as the product of a wholly unmotivated and innocent process, thereby masking the ways in which the face is distributed through socio-cultural mechanisms. From this perspective, the story that Levinas tells us about the face starts to seem extremely convenient for those whose bodies and lives are typically valued and protected by state power, and tantamount to a death sentence for those who are not. Like so many other universalisms, including those to which it is ostensibly opposed, doesn’t the blankness of the Levinasian face default to whiteness? If so, is there anything to stop it from serving as a tool of white supremacy?

My position here is that if we are to continue using Levinas, we must allow his thought to be troubled by these kind of a questions, even to the point where his philosophical project begins to collapse. We can preserve, I think, the notion of the face as the site of the absolutely other and its concomitant ethical obligation, as well as the assertion that the form that the face might take cannot be given in advance, whilst insisting that the theory account for the effects of power and representation. What may not survive is his insistence on the pre-ontological priority of the face-to-face encounter, and hence his critique of totality. I submit that this is a deal worth making.

**“A Surface-Holes, Holey Surface System”**

What Levinas’ thought lacks, then, is an account of the system according to which faces are granted or withheld. This is precisely what Deleuze and Guattari attempt to provide in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In the chapter “Year Zero”, they conceive of the face not as an inherent attribute of the human or any other creature, but rather as a semiotic system which is “overcoded” onto the body: “The head, even the human head, is not necessarily a face. The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body…when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code – when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be *overcoded* by something we shall call the Face.”[[97]](#footnote-97) This semiotic, which they label “faciality” (*visagéité*), is not in any sense natural. “Concrete faces,” they proclaim, “cannot be assumed to come ready-made. They are engendered by an *abstract machine of faciality* (*visagéité*).”[[98]](#footnote-98)

As a semiotic system, faciality comprises two elements. On the one hand, there is the “white wall” of “signifiance…upon which it inscribes its signs and redundancies”, and on the other, the “black hole” of “subjectification…in which it lodges its consciousness, passion and redundancies.”[[99]](#footnote-99) The white wall defines the face’s function as a kind of screen onto which significations are projected; the black hole, evoking of course the depthless darkness of the eyes and mouth, describes its capacity to evoke the presence of a subject. The face, then, is the site at which these two semiotic functions intersect and are inextricably crossed – a “surface-holes, holey surface, system.”[[100]](#footnote-100) When combined in this way (and this is the purpose of faciality, from a socio-political perspective) the operations of signifiance and subjectification become mutually regulative. That is to say, certain styles of signification are understood to determine specific styles of subject and vice versa. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “Faces are not basically individual: they define zones of frequency or probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations.”[[101]](#footnote-101)

This system of faciality does not spring from nowhere. It is, as we observed above, produced by the workings of an “abstract machine”, which is itself set in motion by a certain form of social structure. “When does the abstract machine of faciality enter into play? When is it triggered?...This is an affair not of ideology but of economy and the organization of power…*Certain assemblages of power require the production of a face*, others do not.”[[102]](#footnote-102) Faciality, Deleuze and Guattari argue, is a means by which power organises subjects into a tractable social hierarchy. In this regard, it has two main functions. First, there is the production of individualised faces within a binary system. To be given a face in this sense is to be slotted into an “elementary facial unit” defined in relation to its opposite: “Regardless of the content one gives it, the machine constitutes a facial unit, an elementary face in biunivocal relation with another: it is a man or a woman, a rich person or a poor one, an adult or a child, a leader or a subject, “an x or a y.”…four-eye machines made of elementary faces linked together two by two.”[[103]](#footnote-103) Second, there is the process of assessing and ranking each face with regard to its place within a general hierarchical system, described as follows:

[Given] a concrete face, the machine judges whether it passes or not, whether it goes or not, on the basis of the elementary facial units…At every moment, the machine rejects faces that do not conform, or seem suspicious…it is necessary to produce successive divergence-types of deviance for everything that eludes biunivocal relationships, and to establish binary relations between what is accepted on first choice and what is only tolerated on second, third choice, etc…A ha! It’s not a man and it’s not a woman, so it must be a trans-vestite (*sic*)…At any rate, you’ve been recognized, the abstract machine has you inscribed in its overall grid.[[104]](#footnote-104)

Faciality projects a “grid” which at once defines the overall system of face-based social classification and the semiotic bandwidth of any given face within it. It therefore demarks both the outer limits of what can be recognized as having a face (and presumably afforded a degree of basic citizenship or moral considerability) as well as providing the basis of a hierarchy internal to that category. Just as we saw in Sloterdijk’s “protraction” and Camper’s facial line, it is the role of the face to police the external boundaries of the human whilst simultaneously offering a means of managing the distribution of power and entitlement amongst the ranks of those so recognized. It is moreover, a way of inscribing these lines of domination directly onto the body itself. “Bodies are disciplined, corporeality dismantled, becomings-animal hounded out, deterritorialization pushed to new threshold – a jump is made from the organic strata to the strata of signifiance and subjectification.”[[105]](#footnote-105)

Deleuze and Guattari’s “faciality” is a useful corrective to Levinas’ problematic universalism. It reminds us, at the least, that the experience of the face does not always correspond to the kind of ethical recognition he describes, and that in fact there are circumstances where a struggle may have to be waged *against the face* if the “infinite demand” of a particular person or group is to be heard and acknowledged. “Faciality” may prove to be a useful critical tool in this regard, insofar as it not only denaturalizes the semiotic function of the face, but also gives us some purchase on its inner workings. It is the unthought imaginary that smooths our interpellation into the various systems of utility in which our faces are implicated – passports, identity cards, CCTV networks, government databases.

On the other hand, its usefulness is constrained by its author’s totalizing approach to history and their somewhat obtuse notion of the political. With regard to the former, Deleuze and Guattari understand faciality as the product of a cultural lineage not dissimilar to that sketched out by Sloterdijk: “The face is not a universal. It is not even that of the white man; it is the White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of his eyes. The face is Christ.” There is nothing wrong with this proposal in itself – indeed, to the extent that faciality can and does have a role to play within the iconographies of white supremacy it is an essential insight. However, to the extent that it conforms the system of faciality to a master narrative regarding the development of Western culture it hobbles their critique. One issue is the way in which this kind of broad-strokes approach licenses sweeping, orientalist judgments like the following: ““Primitives” may have the most human of heads, the most beautiful and most spiritual, but they have no face and need none.”[[106]](#footnote-106) Another is the restricted notion it leaves of the face’s potential applications and contexts of use. This relates to my latter complaint, which can be summed up in the following dictum: “The face is a politics.”[[107]](#footnote-107) The deleterious effects of this proposition will be discussed at length in the final chapter; for now, it is enough to note that the idea that the face manifests *a* politics singular risks blinding use to the full range of political uses to which it may be turned.

**Modes of Encounter**

Both Levinas and Deleuze and Guattari provide us with invaluable tools for analysing the political and ethical function of the face within distinct cultural contexts. However, not only are the two approaches implicitly antagonistic, each also has fundamental blind-spots with which anyone who seeks to use their theories is obliged to reckon. There is one critic in particular whose work suggests a way forward between these two rather intimidating prospects – Sara Ahmed, whose critique of Levinas in her *Strange Encounters* provides a masterclass in how to productively refit a canonical theoretical project without either dissolving its concrete particularities or compromising one’s own political commitments.

In the first instance, Ahmed takes Levinas to task for the way in which his concept of the other is “abstracted from particular others”, and therefore obscures the ways in which otherness, strangeness or foreignness are not equally distributed, but instead organized according to the power differentials which define a particular social conjunction.[[108]](#footnote-108) Levinas imagines the face-to-face encounter almost as if it takes place on an abstract plane – the circumstances which brought the people in question together to create this meeting are considered beside the point. To an extent, this is a calculated consequence of Levinas’ insistence that the other has no qualifying criteria through which we could recognise or dismiss it beforehand, thereby addressing us immediately as an ethical, rather than a rational subject. However, as noted above, this gesture leaves his philosophy liable to slide into a kind of humanist anti-politics, where the “spontaneity” of the ethical response becomes an alibi for the various structural factors which determine certain kinds of individual as more or less deserving of our moral consideration. Ahmed counters by arguing that the face-to-face encounter is not a purely (anti-)phenomenological experience, but is actually subject to a range of prior social and historical influences which determine the possibility of the face’s appearance as such. “The face-to-face encounter,” she suggests, “is mediated by that which allows the face to appear in the present. The face-to-face is hence not simply about two persons facing each other…This encounter is mediated; it presupposes other faces, other encounters of facing, other bodies, other spaces, and other times.”[[109]](#footnote-109)

Under the guise of this apparently most immediate and transparent of all interactions, a range of social and historical factors are in fact brought into play, determining the terms according to which the face is able to emerge. Who looks, and who is looked at? How is this relation established? With what forms of coercion? Is there resistance, and how does it manifest? These are all issues of the distribution and exertion of power, and indeed, Ahmed insists that we understand the face-to-face encounter first of all in terms of antagonism:

The face-to-face meeting is not between two subjects who are equal and in harmony; the meeting is antagonistic. The coming together of others that allows the ‘one’ to exist takes place given that there is an asymmetry of power…The face-to-face encounter cannot…be detached or isolated from such broader relations of antagonism: to do so, would be forget how the possibility or impossibility of some-face-to-face encounters is already determined.[[110]](#footnote-110)

The absolutely Other, she argues, is all well and good as a normative ideal, but in practice the face of the Other never simply appears to us out of nowhere. The possibility of its emergence is subject to geographic, legal, cultural and economic restrictions, and its role as a medium of ethical relationality is troubled by the fact that certain people are more likely to be granted a face than others, and then only under particular circumstances and with specific patterns of significance. Moreover, for some people, to receive a face may be othering in a different sense, marking them as part of a class of indigent outsiders without access to the infrastructures of media, language, education and property which determine one’s ability to dictate the terms according to which one’s face is produced. It is not so simple as to say that certain people of a particular race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or class are denied a face, and therefore excluded from ethical considerability. To receive a face may just as easily be experienced as an imposition, if an individual is forced to present as a face without consenting or being allowed to negotiate the conditions under which they appear as such. It cannot therefore be assumed that the face is benign. The kind of distinction that we are trying to grasp here is the difference between turning towards an old friend who calls you by a familiar nickname, and showing one’s face to a border guard who reads you your details off an official document.

Ahmed’s prescription, then, is to study the specific “modes of encounter” through which the relationship of facing becomes possible. This is not the same, she stresses, as to attempt to define the characteristics of the other in advance by ascribing to its face a list of determinate characteristics. “To introduce particularity is not necessarily to assume the other is graspable in ‘this other,’” Ahmed argues. “One possibility is to avoid using particularity as a description of an other, which turns ‘this-ness’ into a property of her body or her speech. Instead, we can begin to think of particularity as a question of *modes of encounter* through which others are faced.” In other words, we should not ask, “What is the face of the other?” but, “What are the conditions according to which the face of the other appears as such?” “This is not,” she further maintains, “a question of describing the face’s appearance, but describing what is already at stake in allowing some faces to appear, to be encountered or faced, in the first place.”[[111]](#footnote-111) This means addressing the “finite and particular circumstances” according to which we experience a face, the way that it is presented to us and framed, what is foregrounded in this presentation, and what is occluded. It entails not so much thinking the properties of a face as “something that this other *has*” as trying to imagine “how such differences are determined at the level of the encounter, insofar as the immediacy of the face to face is affected by broader social processes, that also operate elsewhere, and in other times, rather than simply in the present.”[[112]](#footnote-112)

The foundational proposition of this project is that the meanings and values attributed to a face in any given conjunction are inextricable from the visual technologies through which it is realized as a visual object. It follows from this that one way of grasping the “modes of encounter” which determine the experience of a particular face is through a historicized critical appraisal of the technologies which allow it to appear to us as such. This is not because “technology” stands in a determinative relationship to social reality, but rather because it is a mode through which social forces are actualised. The structure of visual technologies and the uses to which they are put is in part the product of a struggle of the form and content of the visible; by reading technology for the traces of this struggle it is possible to reproduce the political stakes inherent in the question of what appears in and as the face.

Chapter One will begin by examining the work of the eighteenth-century Swiss pastor, poet, theologian, proto-self-help guru and phyiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater. A brief introduction will be given to the concept of physiognomy as a hermeneutic system dedicated to explicating the relationship between the features of a face and the characteristics of the individual to whom it belonged, before a longer discussion of Lavater’s writing, and particularly his investment in the technology of the silhouette as the means through which knowledge of the face could be produced. Chapter Two will move ahead some fifty years to the inception of photography, and attempt to theorise the way in which this revolutionary transformation in the way that images of the face were produced and circulated altered the conditions governing how it could be understood. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the pioneering neurologist and photographer Duchenne du Boulogne and his “electrophysiological investigations.” Chapter Three will skip on again to the early days of cinema, covering the period from the medium’s first stirrings to the advent of the sound film. Here we will introduce the ideas of the Hungarian film theorist Béla Bálazs, one of the most original and problematic thinkers of his day, as well as attempting to understand the specific ways in which the filmic medium addresses the problem of the face. Chapter Four will constitute something of a case study, attempting to draw together ideas developed in previous sections, and focussing on the visual culture of Germany between the wars. The political catastrophes of this period are well-known, but what is perhaps less familiar is the extent to which the 1920s and 30s saw an astonishing revival of physiognomic discourse, a phenomenon which played directly into the facial iconographies which developed throughout the Weimar and Nazi periods. Chapter Five shifts our focus to the present day, reviewing a series of theoretical pronouncements either calling for or predicting “the end of the face.” This chapter will attempt to relate these prognostications to the relationship between the face and visual technology as it currently stands, almost two decades into the twenty-first century. The concluding section will attempt to look forward, suggesting a basis for a “tactics of post-faciality”, through which we might seek to defend what remains of the face in an increasingly grim-looking future.

**Chapter One: The Love and Knowledge of Man**

Every man who, without some external accident of force, does not remain in the general parallelism of humanity, is a monster born; and the more he remains in the purest, horizontal, perpendicular, parallelism of the human form, the more is he perfect, manly, and divine.

Johann Kaspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*

**The Priest and the Emperor**

Whilst surveying his dominions in the summer of 1777, the Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II and his entourage came to lodge at the town of Waldshut, close to the border between the Grand Duchy of Baden and the Swiss Confederation. One of the eighteenth century’s great enlightened despots, Joseph was intrigued to discover that his visit coincided with one of the foremost literary celebrities of the German-speaking world – the Swiss pastor, poet and theologian Johann Kaspar Lavater, who had travelled with a friend from his home in nearby Zurich. Lavater was at this point on the cusp of continental fame, an eminence which would be secured by the publication of his four-volume opus *Physiognomic Fragments for Furthering the Love and Knowledge of Man* between the years 1775 and 1778. Physiognomy, as Lavater defined it, “is the science or knowledge of the correspondence between the external and internal man, the visible superficies and the invisible contents,” and across the span of this voluminous body of work, he proselytised an intricate set of techniques for reading the signs of individual character from the features of the human face.[[113]](#footnote-113) Not one to miss an opportunity to indulge in a little learned discourse, and naturally interested by the prospect of a discipline that would allow the initiate to glean the secrets of a person’s heart from their outward appearance, the emperor summoned the priest into his presence.

After the requisite forelock-tugging on the part of Lavater, the two got down to brass tacks. “‘And how,’ said the emperor, ‘have you treated the subject? In what do you differ from your predecessors?” The priest replied as follows:

I have…taken an entirely different course from all my predecessors who are known to me. I merely observe; and assert nothing but from my own observation. I have certainly affirmed much less than the old writers on the subject; but what I have said has been much more precise and defined; and in this science, accuracy and precision are of infinite importance.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Lavater distinguished himself, he asserted, by being the first physiognomist to base his system directly upon the observation of physical reality, rather than the received wisdom of his forbears. He was, in fact, generally disparaging of previous authorities in his field, airily informing Joseph that he had actually read “very few” of the extant physiognomic treatises, and suggesting that those which he had taken the time to peruse proved scarcely worth the effort.[[115]](#footnote-115) Elsewhere, he recommended that an apprentice physiognomist spend no more than two weeks of their training consulting the literature (a period that, presumably, was supposed to include the study of Lavater’s own considerable oeuvre).[[116]](#footnote-116) This derogation of the physiognomic tradition was an essential part of Lavater’s marketing, burnishing his empiricist *bona fides* and casting himself as a great scourge of cant and superstition, dragging his discipline out of the shadowy realm of magic and proverb and into the light of practical knowledge.

**The Physiognomic Idea**

The European tradition of physiognomy, understood as an attempt to formulate a generally applicable method for deducing characterological traits from bodily features, stretches back at least as far as ancient Greece. This impressive pedigree notwithstanding, it can scarcely be considered a discipline with a set of consistent doctrines and practices, even to the extent that other mysticisms such as astrology, palmistry or tarot-reading might be. At one historical moment or another, self-described physiognomists have attempted to crack the body’s hidden code through animal resemblances, cosmological analogies and humoral physiology. Some focussed on the hard, skeletal structures of the face, whilst others concentrated on its mobile, expressive features. At one time, physiognomists have claimed to be discovering the secrets of the individual soul, at others collective racial identity, and latterly more ostensibly empirical concepts such as personality or genetic predisposition. It is a parasite living in the guts of other scientific and intellectual paradigms, co-opting whatever it can from current theoretical and epistemological apparatuses for its own purposes. Its history doesn’t play out as a teleology, or even a paradigmatic succession, so much as a recurring loop of ontological presumptions, ideological investments and methodological tropes, passing irregularly in and out of fashion.

The earliest extant text on the subject is the “Physiognomica”, a short handbook for aspiring face-readers that was once erroneously attributed to Aristotle, but is now thought to have been written some time around 300 BCE. Like most forms of physiognomy, it grounds itself initially in a kind of common sense: “There never was an animal with the form of one kind and the mental character of another, the soul and body appropriate to the same kind always go together, and this shows that a specific body involves a specific mental character.”[[117]](#footnote-117) Both the techniques it advocates – the elaboration of general physiognomic rules on the basis of the comparative study of animal and human anatomy and behaviour – and the conclusions it advances (a special mention for: “Men addicted to Gaming and Dancing have short arms, like weasels”)[[118]](#footnote-118) may now seem transparently preposterous, but this combination of superficially plausible truisms and bizarre atavisms directs us towards one of the enduring themes which defines physiognomy as such.

In the most general sense, the basic idea of physiognomy emerges from the interaction between two distinct, conflicting but also inseparably linked approaches to the question of how faces mean. The first of these sees it as an especially useful source of emergent, contextually contingent hints as to the possible intentions, desires or emotional state of another person, as well as some limited indications of demographic features such as age, gender, ethnicity and so on. By virtue of its more or less permanent identifying characteristics, its elaborately interleaved expressive musculature, the presence of the eyes and mouth and its prominent frontal role within our intersubjective interactions, a face can provide us with a rich and constantly refreshed stream of clues and suggestions about the people around us – what they may be about to do, what they might want or need from us, or how they are responding to our words and actions. To be truly “face-to-face” with another person is to feel that we are the sole target of their expressive discourse, that whatever is meant by their face is meant specially for us, from the stream of brief cues which course-correct our most trivial conversations to those moments when the soul seems to “rise to the surface of [the] body, like a crew charging up from the bowels of a ship, spreading out over the deck, waving at the sky and singing in jubilation.”[[119]](#footnote-119) This everyday intimacy is one of those basic existential bequests whose preciousness is a direct function of its mundanity. The capacity of children to recognise and respond to faces in their earliest days is well-established.[[120]](#footnote-120) For the fortunate majority, it seems that that there is something fundamental about this opening of one self to another through the face.

In her wonderful essay “The Face and the Soul,” Patrizia Magli describes this ordinary experience of face-reading as a form of daily knowledge, a treasure belonging to us all.” She continues:

The face of those near us presents itself as the space upon which it is possible to perceive infinitesimal traces which, in turn, sometimes allow us to glean a deeper reality, one hidden to most eyes…It is that type of knowledge without origin, memory or history, of which literary culture continues to attempt a precise verbal formulation, most often only succeeding in creating pale and impoverished formulas.

Quoting the historian Carlo Ginzburg, she compares this faculty to the “flexible, yet precise, physiognomic penetration of a lover, a horse-dealer, or a card-player.” [[121]](#footnote-121) Like each of these figures, we all of us make our readings of other’s faces in a strategic, relational context. Consciously or otherwise, we speculate about our interlocuter’s age, ethnicity and gender identity; we make suppositions about their intentions, desires and their current emotional state. These are all uncertain judgements, hazarded on the balance of probabilities and in the teeth of misapprehension. Our supposition that a smiling person is happy may be proved correct, but only in the same sense that the gambler is justified by anticipating the turn of the cards. We are validated, not because we have divined some essential truth, but because something that our “happy” friend does or says seems to vindicate our predictions. If they had spoke or acted otherwise, we would not have seemed so perspicacious.

As in any game of skill, experience can be sharpened into technique, but even the best poker player sometimes falls for a bluff – which is fortunate, otherwise poker would soon cease to be enjoyable or interesting. Nevertheless, we escape the paralysis of indecision by venturing our guesses with a gambler’s brio, a calculated recklessness that is always in danger of hardening into conviction. Just as a man who wins at dice quickly elaborates the random epiphenomena of his success into a superstitious ritual (standing on one leg, blowing on the dice and so on), so do we tend, through practice and instruction, to turn speculations that served us well under certain circumstances into a general formula. Downcast eyes must always indicate disappointment; red cheeks, irritability; a wrinkled brow, thoughtfulness. This points us towards the second sense of the physiognomic idea – a faculty which extends beyond an uncertain “inference method” into a “system of sign correlation…established by convention.”[[122]](#footnote-122) It describes the structures that result once we start to elaborate our ability to make more or less reasonable speculations on the basis of a person’s facial appearance into rules of thumb, proverbial mantras, and eventually quasi-scientific methodologies with pretensions to universal diagnostic value.

Evolutionary psychology has, in fact, come up with a useful term for this phenomenon: “overgeneralization.” In the words of psychologists Zebrowitz and Montepare, “some facial qualities are so useful in guiding adaptive behavior that even a trace of those qualities can elicit a response. The errors produced by these overgeneralizations are presumed to be less maladaptive than those that might result from failing to respond appropriately to persons who vary in fitness, age, emotion, or familiarity.” In other words, the cues that we receive from faces in certain specific contexts are so useful *in those contexts* that we tend to look for them even in situations where they do not necessarily apply. So, for instance, Zebrowitz and Montepare explain how our impressions of a person’s transient emotional state tend to be extrapolated into a general idea of their “behavioral tendencies and traits.” “[A]nger,” they write, “conveys a tendency to attack in a domineering, hostile and unfriendly manner. Accurate impressions of these transient behavioral tendencies are overgeneralized to impressions of more stable traits – a *temporal extension* effect whereby “the perceiver regards a momentary characteristic of the person as if it were an enduring attribute” (Secord, 1958).””[[123]](#footnote-123) This semi-reflexive habit of ontologising behavioural patterns may prove useful in situations where the benefits of pre-emptive action outweigh the risks of making a flawed assumption. Note that it is not the “correctness” of the interpretation which is at stake here, rather the extent to which the tendency to overgeneralize promotes adaptive behaviour, such as showing deference to a superior or fleeing a confrontation. On this basis, it is quite possible to imagine how experience is (over)generalized into habits which can then be communicated and taught between individuals, later becoming a part of collective folk-knowledge and, even further down the line, being elaborated into explicit semiotic systems. What begins as a contextually sensitive and inherently fallible capacity to interpret certain bodily traits and expressive behaviours as informative cues ends with a practice which aspires to assign invariant meanings to specific somatic characteristics.

The concept of overgeneralization helps to shed some light on the nature of the relationship between these two versions of physiognomy, one of which describes a recurrent but unformalizable aspect of everyday experience, familiar to almost everyone, the other a spectrum of personal beliefs, proverbial wisdom, just-so stories and, at the extreme limit, various historically documented methodologies designed to predict the properties of a being on the basis of its facial appearance. The essential insight here is that physiognomy as a systematic, diagnostic method always has its roots in, and derives much of its apparent plausibility from, physiognomy as an intuitive experience. The remarkable historical persistence of academic physiognomy, in spite of repeated refutations and periods of infamy or obscurity, must in part be attributed to its capacity to withdraw and retrench itself within a thousand time-honoured proverbs, seemingly self-evident deductions, and judgements apparently borne out by experience. Not only does this mean that physiognomy is always wont to spring back to life, like a decapitated weed whose roots remain beneath the soil, it also ensures that it is always possible for the latest generation of adherents to disavow their predecessors, even as they reproduce many of their essential premises. *They* were ignorantly reproducing hoary old bigotry and superstition, but *we* have returned to the fundamental source of physiognomic insight, grounded in experience and proceeding solely on the basis of empirical investigation.

**Simplifying, Developing, Producing**

Lavater’s appeal to experience and observation was therefore to some extent a conventional trope of physiognomic rhetoric. This is not to say, however, that Lavater’s system demonstrated no originality. He brought to the subject an idiosyncratic blend of eighteenth-century Germanic aesthetics, a good Protestant’s belief in the providential structure of the universe, and an effusive rhetorical commitment to the empirical method. And it is indeed in this last characteristic that the historical distinctiveness of his project is to be found, although not exactly in the way he presented it to Joseph. A general feature of previous systems of physiognomy, such as we find in the works of the Neapolitan polymath Giambattista della Porta (c.1535-1615), or the French painter and art theorist Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), was that they sought to interpret the human body and face through systems of analogy. If the face was a coded text, then the cipher was to be found in some external pattern, such as animal resemblances, humoral physiology or astrological symbolism. As Magli explains, this mechanism enabled the physiognomist to “recognize a complex form by means of a more simple and elementary one,” interpreting the obscure and refractory relation between face and soul through a relatively more straightforward and well-established framework.[[124]](#footnote-124) The “Physiognomica”, for instance, argued that it was possible to discover the somatic signs of a particular characteristic (i.e., greed) by identifying and comparing the bodies of all creatures (human and animal) who demonstrate that characteristic, then isolating their common physical features.[[125]](#footnote-125) Hence the notion that an individual with a “pig-like” face will tend towards piggish behaviour. What were (at the time) generally accepted truisms regarding the nature of animals became the prism through which the significance of the human face could be clarified.[[126]](#footnote-126)

Lavater sought to do away with these systems of hermeneutic scaffolding, proposing instead to derive his interpretive method directly from the body itself. His aim was to extract from the face a kind of symbolic language, capable simultaneously of reducing its visual forms to a set of generally applicable signs and describing each particular face with sensitivity and precision. To this end, he attempted to provide both a set of a broad principles according to which a face’s meaning ought to be construed (we might think of these principles as a grammar) as well as an exhaustive taxonomy of individual facial features and their meanings (that is, a vocabulary). Grammatically, Lavater split the human countenance horizontally into three zones, roughly corresponding to the forehead, the nose and the chin and linked respectively to intellectual, moral and animal faculties. The vertical order of these zones denoted a descending hierarchy of significance.[[127]](#footnote-127) Not only did Lavater value intellectual qualities more highly than the moral or the animal (this last referring to hunger, need, sexual desire etc.), he also believed that it was these characteristics which provided the key to an individual’s personality, to the extent, he argued, that the features of the lower part of the face could often be derived solely from the shape of the forehead.

Accordingly, he advised his disciples that when seeking physiognomic similarities between different faces, they should proceed as follows: “let observation, at first, be confined to the forehead. – As is the resemblance of the forehead, so will be the resemblance of the rest of the features. – The grand secret of physiognomical observation consists in simplifying, developing, producing, the principal, the characteristic features.”[[128]](#footnote-128) “The physiognomist,” he continues, “might facilitate his observations, were he to mark the various shades of the forehead with various letters of the alphabet, so that each forehead might have its correspondent letter, or its general name appropriated to itself.”[[129]](#footnote-129) The forehead forms the semantic outline – the syntactic structure, if you will – into which the meanings of the rest of the features will be slotted. This outline was chiefly determined by the angle of the brow relative to the rest of the face: “The form, height, arching, proportion, obliquity, and position of the skull, or bone of the forehead, show the propensity, degree of power, thought, and sensibility of man. The covering, or skin, of the forehead, its position, colour, wrinkles, and tension, denote the passions and present state of the mind.” Generally speaking, a perpendicular or even a projecting forehead demonstrated these qualities in a higher degree than a retreating or sloping one, whilst a longer forehead indicated “more comprehension, less activity”, and a shorter “more firmness, less volatility.”[[130]](#footnote-130) These details established a benchmark according to which the importance of lower-order features could be assessed. Proceeding down the face through the nose and mouth, any signs fitting the profile established by the forehead could be registered as meaningful, whilst those which did not conform were written off as epiphenomena.

At the most general level, then, Lavater’s system of classification was exceedingly broad and rigid. The dimensions of the forehead were an index of capability, will, intelligence and sensitivity, furnishing a set of cardinal points with which the rudiments of a personality could be plotted. At the level of fine distinctions, however, he strove to deliver a method that was also capable of describing the subject in all its wild and clashing idiosyncrasy. Each feature should be noted, measured and compared against the whole, and the smallest detail could prove to be of telling significance. This commitment to forensic description is most evident in the Borgesian profusion of terms Lavater employed to describe the niceties of each particular visage he encounters. “The physiognomist,” he wrote, “should search for, or invent, a characteristic epithet for every countenance he considers…” For this purpose he recommended the study of languages, particularly French, and the use of a “commonplace book”, in which the physiognomist could jot down any propitious phrases heard in passing. Lavater, for instance, lists thirty-one different terms under the general heading of “wit”, from “captious” to “malignant”.[[131]](#footnote-131) This practice is, of course, utterly useless for the purposes of classification. Whilst it may make more or less intuitive sense to describe a particular nose as a signifier of “captious” as opposed to “malignant” wit, to systematically demonstrate so subtle (not to say, imaginary) a distinction on the basis of the nose’s measurable morphology would be an absurd endeavour. Lavater never really attempts to reconcile this contradiction, meaning that there is always a fundamental disconnect between the typological and the descriptive imperatives of his thought, the need to organise faces into broadly applicable categories and the desire to evoke the specific character of each individual countenance. But it would be wrong to say that this linguistic fecundity was mere quixotic folly. His endlessly pliable vocabulary was designed to flatter the individual with the sense of their own infinite complexity, as well as to present physiognomic analysis as a pleasurable, tactile activity. There is an eroticism here that the otherwise pathologically chaste pastor can scarcely admit to, which implores the reader to enjoy, lingeringly, the sensation of running one’s gaze along the surface of the face, following its lines, marking its ridges and its hollows, shifting from transparencies to opacities and back again until it yields its secret essence.

**The Physiognomist’s Gallery**

This, then, was the broad outline of Lavater’s method, a practice which obviously necessitated careful and sustained scrutiny of as many faces as possible. This requirement immediately confronted him with a problem. Lavaterian physiognomy needed to access the face as an object with fixed, observable qualities, to painstakingly note its forms and measurements, to divide it forensically into its various semantic units. A face, however, is not a static plane. Its surface is perpetually in a greater or lesser state of agitation, with its stable structures played off against constantly alternating patterns of muscular contortion. Expressions are frequently generated or informed by rapid changes to small facial areas, which strike us intuitively in ways that we cannot always explain. A brief motion of the mouth or eyes can fleetingly transform the apparent significance of the whole. How could such phenomena be subjected to repeated observation? How could the face become an object susceptible to empirical analysis? Lavater, to be fair, did not hide from this quandary:

How often does it happen that the seat of character is so hidden, so enveloped, so masked, that it can only be caught in certain, and, perhaps, uncommon positions of the countenance, which will again be changed, and the signs all disappear, before they have made any durable impression! Or, supposing the impression made, these distinguishing traits may be so difficult to seize, that it shall be impossible to paint, much less to engrave, or describe them by language.[[132]](#footnote-132)

Lavater sought to establish a facial hermeneutics based on systematic observation. At the same time, he acknowledged that the face’s true significance might not always be straightforwardly observable. Vision can be mistaken or deceived; it may be insufficiently sensitive, or it might be focused on the wrong site. And assuming that the eye successfully distinguishes the face’s meaning, how can this impression be preserved such that it can be studied at length, broken down into its constituent elements, compared to other faces and so on?

Lavater’s chief advantage over his predecessors in this regard was the quantity and quality of images available to him for the purposes of both study and demonstration. The early editions of the *Physiognomic Fragments* were lavish quartos crammed with hundreds of printed illustrations, many of which were commissioned specifically for the project. They were accordingly expensive both to produce and to purchase, but Lavater covered his considerable overheads with a subscription model that will feel familiar to many modern creatives in the age of Kickstarter and Patreon. As Richard T. Gray explains, early-adopters were invited to send off a portrait or silhouette, which the author promised to decode in his next edition. “This ploy,” Gray continues, “was so well orchestrated that Lavater ultimately assembled a collection of more than twenty-two thousand images.”[[133]](#footnote-133) This library, cobbled together from a hodgepodge of different media formats including line drawings, profiles, reproductions of famous busts and portraits, and sketches of individual features abstracted from the rest of the face, furnished the dataset from which Lavater could build the principles of his theory. Of course, this yielded a wild and unsystematic collection of examples to work from, but from a certain perspective this could almost be seen as a virtue. If Lavater was able to brute-force a coherent semiotics from such a variety of visual materials, then wouldn’t that demonstrate all the more convincingly that there was a significant structure – a physiognomics – underlying these motley articles?

However, as the above quotation indicates, Lavater chafed irritably against the limitations of the available media. Drawing, painting and engraving are all slow media, incapable of capturing an impression in the moment that it appears. Their fidelity is not only dependent upon the skill of the artist, but also her vision and her memory. In this sense, they are downstream of perception, and hence susceptible to the very same issues of objectivity and fallibility that Lavater had turned to them to solve. It was his tendency to “correct” images as part of the process of analysis, arguing that details which did not fit with his overall reading were the result of the draughtsperson’s error or the limitations of a particular medium. This led in turn to a tense relationship between the physiognomist and the several artists who furnished images for his publications. Percival records that Lavater’s friend Henry Fuseli complained that the work “stifled” him, and that “[cramming] nine profile heads onto a single page was a futile task.” Meanwhile, Lavater scorned the work of several of the artists whose images appeared in the very same text, opining that “Koella was a plodding worker who lacked genius; Pfenniger had no imagination.”[[134]](#footnote-134) When Fuseli came to oversee the compilation of the first British edition of Lavater’s works, he replaced many of what he saw as “mediocre” images with new ones, meaning that in many cases Lavater’s interpretations were no longer matched with the relevant picture. “In compensation,” Percival explains, “the editors of the *Essays on Physiognomy* inserted a sort of metatext which consisted of footnotes and inscriptions on the engravings. Some of these simply point out the discrepancy between image and text with the purpose of clarifying Lavater’s intentions; but others are more subversive, for they suggest that Lavater was mistaken in his original judgements.”[[135]](#footnote-135)

The nature of these disputes between Lavater and his collaborators helps to illuminate what was really at stake in the relation of the physiognomist to his illustrative media: control. Images of the face were essential to Lavater, since it was from them that he hoped to derive his interpretive rules. But they simultaneously posed the constant threat of semiotic multiplicity. Marked by the hand of the artist who produced them and haunted by the unruly subjectivity of the sitter, Lavater’s faces winked and smirked back at him, even as he strove to corral the range of their possible meanings within a single correct reading. Out of this dynamic emerged the physiognomists’ idiosyncratic relationship with his technologies of vision. His struggle to dominate the face’s significance expressed itself in the media forms to which he resorted; in turn, these media shaped the theoretical, methodological and propositional content of his system, to the extent that it is a matter of profound indifference whether his theory was exuded by his technology, or vice versa. As we shall see, the role of representational technology was integral to Lavater’s system, producing for him the docile and legible face which he would go on to decode.

**“Isn’t it presumptuous to analyse faces?”**

In the following key passage, Lavater elucidates the fundamental dilemma of his entire project:

[My] observations must be exact; they must be repeated and tested often. How can that be possible if I have to make these observations on the sly? Isn’t it presumptuous to analyse faces? And if a humble person notices that she is being observed, won’t she turn away and hide her face? Indeed, it is here that I encountered one of the greatest obstacles to my studies; anyone who notices that he or she is being observed either puts up resistance or dissimulates. How can I get around this problem? Perhaps in part in the following way.

 I retire into solitude; I place before me a medallion or a piece of antique sculpture, the sketches of a Raphael, the apostles as depicted by Van Dyck, the portraits of Houbraken. These I can observe at will, I can turn them and view them from all sides.[[136]](#footnote-136)

It’s worth taking a second to enjoy the image of Lavater sneaking around Zurich incognito, loitering in doorways and alleys, trying to size up the physiognomy of unsuspecting passers-by. This vision, which in any case may not be so far from the truth, dramatizes the dilemma that Lavater had to reckon with. The living face of the other does not exist in the abstract vacuum of radical empiricism, and the physiognomist cannot approach it as if he were a disembodied eye. Rather, a face is encountered in a concrete social space that emerges out of the reciprocal facing of all parties involved. This space is charged with affect, shaped by the needs and motivations of its participants, and determined by their relation to each other. Lavater’s sensitivity to the reactions of his subjects to his gaze (embarrassment, hostility, irritation) betrays his awareness that he was himself directly implicated in the relation that structured their face’s significance. His presence, he acknowledges, affected the faces of his interlocutors, whilst he was affected in turn, a reciprocity that was doubtless evident in his own face as it appeared to others. It was only by risking this intimate, relational space that Lavater could get close enough to study and decode the face’s hidden meanings, but this motion made the scientist himself a protagonist within the experimental set-up, thereby putting his objectivity in jeopardy.

The possibility of “dissimulation” appears in the first instance to be a potentially fatal danger for Lavater’s project. However, on closer examination, an exclusive focus on the deceitfulness of the physiognomic subject actually helps to support his theories, to the extent that it reinforces an absolute distinction between true and false faces that the physiognomist is then empowered to legislate. A truthful face is one that transparently reveals the inner life, character or propensities of the subject; a false face attempts to hide or counterfeit the same. Part of the technique of physiognomy, presumably, is learning how to distinguish between the two. However, the notion of false faces actually implies a more disruptive idea. Insofar as it demonstrates that the meaning of the face can *sometimes* be determined by the exigencies of intersubjective communication (i.e. that one party wants to appear in a certain way, or send a certain message, to others), and not simply the externalisation of some inner essence, it also implies the possibility that *all* faces might be motivated in a similar manner. Physiognomy presumes that the face is the site of a process of spiritual convection, wherein the soul rises ineluctably to the surface of the body. But what if faces are not only expressive externalisations of internal states, but also tools that we employ in the tactical context of a particular encounter, consciously or otherwise, with a view to eliciting or discouraging a certain response from others? What if it is in fact the pragmatics of this situation, rather than the correspondence between soul and body, that is crucial in shaping the face’s visible meanings? At the very least, the problem of dissimulation raises this as a question with which physiognomy is obliged to reckon.

This anti-physiognomic hypothesis corresponds in substance to what modern evolutionary psychologists call the “behavioural ecology” approach to expressive displays. This theory emerged as an alternative to the so-called “basic emotions” model, which argued that expressive behaviour is an external manifestation of internal emotional states, which are supposed to be innate and universal. This theory imposes a rigid (and, as one of its critics Alan Fridlund argues, “crypto-moralistic”) distinction between “authentic” expressions, which are reflexive, and therefore reveal “true” feeling, and “social” expressions, which are either “faked” counterfeits of the “basic” emotional displays or willed suppressions of an underlying affect. (It will shortly become clear just how closely this dichotomy corresponds to Lavater’s analytic treatment of the face.) Conversely, the “behavioural ecology” hypothesis dictates that “[facial expressions] are specific to intent and context…there seem to be *no* prototype faces for each [emotional] category. Rather, displays exert their influence in the particular context of their issuance; a face interpreted as “contemptuous” in one context may be interpreted as “exasperated” or even “constipated” in another.”[[137]](#footnote-137) What is essential, then, to grasping the significance of a particular face is not its relation to some pre-determined internal state, but rather the nature of the situation in which it occurs and the possible motivations of the participants. One implication of this model is that it rejects the division between “authentic” and “social” displays, as Fridlund explains: “[no] distinction is made between “felt” and “false” displays issued by “authentic” and “social” selves; instead *all* displays are considered to arise from interaction, thus there is *only* an interactive self.”[[138]](#footnote-138)

This parallel helps to point up exactly how disruptive the interpersonal dimensions of facial meaning were to Lavater’s thesis. He wanted to approach the face as if it were a simple read-out which displays the inner state of the subject without intentionality. If, however, the meanings of a face are emergent and context-dependent, then in what sense can they be understood to express the kind of essential self that Lavater was looking to find in them? His experience of the effects that his presence had on the faces of others was troubling, therefore, not just because it conflicted with his pretensions of objectivity, but also because it confounded the notion that a face has an inherent content independent of the situations in which it appears as such.

Perhaps the most telling element of the passage excerpted above, though, is the following rhetorical question: “Isn’t it presumptuous to analyse faces?” The un-asked for answer here is, “Yes, always.” The idea of presumption directs us first of all the realm of etiquette and social nicety. Under what circumstances, we might ask, is it proper to look at another’s face? Whose face can I look at, and how closely, and for how long? What kinds of consent are required for such an observation to take place? These speculations in turn raises issues of identity, cultural difference and the boundaries between public and private space – themes that open out beyond the sphere of “good manners” and onto a vast terrain of social symbolism and behavioural codes. One way in which we might begin to approach this impossibly complex expanse would be to pose (yet one more) query: What is “presumed” when one looks into the face of another?

As Sara Ahmed demonstrates in her critique of Levinas, the face-to-face encounter always presumes a process of alignment between two or more bodies, a negotiation which, congenial or otherwise, necessarily involves issues of power, consent, coercion or resistance. The question is one of access, and how it is secured. In this context, Lavater’s use of feminine pronouns in the above quotation (“And if a humble person notices that *she* is being observed, won’t *she* turn away and hide *her* face? Indeed, it is here that I encountered one of the greatest obstacles to my studies; anyone who notices that *he or she* is being observed either puts up resistance or dissimulates”) is extremely telling. Lavater’s relationship with the feminine face was beset with ambivalence, awkwardness and even perplexity. At one point, he made the following bashful confession: “I must premise, I am but little acquainted with the female part of the human race. Any man of the world must know more of them than I can pretend to know; my opportunities of seeing them at the theatre, at balls, or at the card table, where they best may be studied, have been exceedingly few. In my youth I almost avoided women, and was never in love.”[[139]](#footnote-139) Nevertheless, whilst the majority of the examples he works from in his text are identified as male, feminine faces form a considerable minority. And elsewhere, he asserted that reading a feminine countenance is a perfectly trivial matter: “Vanity or pride is the general characteristic of all women. – It is only necessary to offend one of these qualities to perceive traits which will enable us to see into the profound depths of their character.”[[140]](#footnote-140)

Lavater’s lonely tale of hard luck in love betrays – as such tales often do – a deep-seated gynophobia. But it also reveals one of the fundamental antinomies of his system. During the *tête-à*-­*tête* between Lavater and Joseph II with which we opened this chapter, the monarch (supposedly “with the significant air of a man of experience”) posed the physiognomist the following riddle: “Women…are governed by men, and apt at imitation. They have no character of their own, and assume any that they choose. Their character is that of the man whom, for the time, they wish to please…What then is their character? Who can ascertain their disposition from their countenance?” Lavater (claiming, as we’ve seen, little first-hand knowledge to draw on) bows to the wisdom of the “man of experience”, whilst maintaining that “at the same time there are certain firm, unchangeable, undisguisable features, tokens of the internal basis of their character, in which the physiognomist will not easily be deceived.”[[141]](#footnote-141) So, on the one hand, the feminine countenance is supposed to be so transparent it is hardly worth studying. On the other, its plasticity presents a crisis for physiognomic legibility, and it is the wellspring of deceit and imitation. The notion that the feminine face is derivative of and parasitic upon the masculine, which women ape in order to flatter (and thereby extract favour, commitments and resources from) powerful men, raises once more the spectre of a face whose meanings are oriented towards a “behavioural ecology,” and which therefore conceals no hidden essence.

In fact, the conceptualisation of the feminine face here is not altogether dissimilar from Homi Bhabha’s account of colonial mimicry – a parallel structure, perhaps, in a radically different context. As Bhabha would have it, mimicry defines “a subject of a difference that is always the same, but not quite,” a state that is imposed on the colonised subject who is forced to imitate the speech, manners and tastes of the coloniser whilst also remaining hierarchically differentiated from them.[[142]](#footnote-142) Whilst this functions in the first instance as mechanism of control (not least as a means of creating an “Anglicized” class of indigenous administrators), Bhabha points out that it simultaneously disrupts and de-essentializes the discourse of identity upon which the colonial project is predicated: “Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask…The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.”[[143]](#footnote-143) In Lavater, the superficiality of the feminine face is imposed as a technique of subordination, figuring femininity as a second sex derivative of the masculine. At the same time, however, the notion that the feminine face lacks a self of its own disturbs the entire essentialist concept of subjectivity upon which physiognomy is based.

In a certain sense, the feminine face was for Lavater the prototype of faces in general, or at least everything in the face which must be disciplined, controlled, bracketed or erased. The feminine countenance embodies the face’s every unruly property – its capacity to dissimulate, its imitative propensity, its embeddedness in an affectively charged social context that bears directly on issues of identity, class and politics. It should come as no surprise, then, that when Lavater confronts the recalcitrant face that fakes or mocks or turns away, he addresses it as a woman. This gesture sums up the conflicted desire that his theory repetitiously enacts – on the one hand, to gather all that he wishes to reject about the face under the sign of the feminine, the better to exile it to the margins of his discourse, and on the other, the impulse to feminise *all* faces, which is to say, to place them all within a position of feminized subjection, fixed beneath his gaze, pinned in a constant state of transparent openness and availability.

This dynamic provides the framework within which we should view all of Lavater’s methodological contortions. His compulsion at every turn was to attempt to eradicate all modes of signification that might be disruptive to his theory by fixing the face into a position of passive subjection. This drive was manifested in many forms. When providing advice for the physiognomist working in the field, he always directed them to seek out situations that placed them in a dominant position relative to their passive subject. So, for example, he recommended that his followers take the opportunity to visit monasteries and study monks at prayer, as well as “hospitals for idiots,” where the inmates are institutionalised such that the physiognomist is able to gaze on them at will.[[144]](#footnote-144) He suggested also that they observe the sleeping and the dead, since “waking men seldom suffer themselves to be accurately observed,” and “what life makes fugitive, death arrests.”[[145]](#footnote-145) To this end he also advised the collection of skulls. This was fitting, since, as we shall see, Lavaterian analysis consists of nothing less than reducing the face to a death’s head.

**The Study of Shades**

This is also the context in which we ought to understand his enthusiasm for his favourite visual medium – the silhouette, or as he called it, the “shade.” “Whoever would study physiognomy should apply himself to the study of shades,” he wrote, “He that despises them despises physiognomy.”[[146]](#footnote-146) Compared to a carving, a sculpture, a portrait or even a sketch, the silhouette bore a number of clear disadvantages. As Lavater himself acknowledged, “the shade contains but one line; no motion, light, colour, height or depth; no eye, ear, nostril or cheek; but a very small part of the lip.” “Yet,” he concluded, “how decisively is it significant!” He was perfectly cognizant of the trade-off represented by the silhouette, a bargain that he framed in the following terms:

Shades are the weakest, most vapid, but, at the same time, when the light is at a proper distance, and falls properly on the countenance to take the profile accurately, the truest representation that can be given of man. – The weakest, because it is not positive, it is only something negative, only the boundary line of half the countenance. The truest, because it is the immediate expression of nature, such as not the ablest painter is capable of drawing by hand, after nature.[[147]](#footnote-147)

The signal advantage of the silhouette, for Lavater, was its “immediacy” to nature. The reasoning behind this assertion, curious as it may seem at first glance, was that the silhouette, unlike the other media he studied or reproduced in his texts, was created by a mechanical, semi-automated process. The silhouette machine, which came into use in the mid-eighteenth century (the name “silhouette” was originally an epithet for anything done on the cheap, taken from a French finance minister known for the imposition of swingeing austerity measures during the Seven Years war), positioned the subject in a seat side-on to the draughtsman. The pair were separated by a wooden frame holding a sliding glass screen, which could be adjusted so that it rested against the sitter’s shoulder. A light source placed on the other side of the sitter cast a shadow against the screen, the outline of which the draughtsman traced onto a sheet of translucent paper. This “negative”, as it were, could then be filled in, cut out and reproduced as many times as required.[[148]](#footnote-148)

The entire contraption, with its thin sheet of glass suspended in a vertical frame, is strikingly reminiscent of another machine designed to separate the head from the body – the guillotine, which was first used in Paris in 1791. Indeed, it was precisely its capacity to make a cut between the solid, lifeless image of the face and the complex, messy world of which it had once been a part that so appealed to Lavater. The glass screen separated the face from the fallible hand, eye and mind of the draughtsman, who became effectively no more than a mechanical arm with a pencil attached.[[149]](#footnote-149) The silhouette did away with the idiosyncrasies and inadequacies of artists, but more decisively, it separated the face entirely from the problematic contexts that disturbed and confounded Lavater’s attempts to produce clear and systematic interpretations. The machine was not affected by the face, did not become bashful or awkward, could be involved in no relation of reciprocity, responded to no demand emerging from the face of the sitter. It bypassed imitation and dissimulation. In fact, it detached the face entirely from the concrete situation towards which its meanings may have been directed, presenting it as a fixed object passively awaiting the physiognomist’s gaze. In a way that no other contemporary medium could, the silhouette served the face up as the ideal datum of physiognomic analysis.

“Shades,” Lavater enthused, “collect the distracted attention, confine it to an outline, and thus render the observation more simple, easy, and precise.”[[150]](#footnote-150) On behalf of his system, the silhouette performed a crucial analytic reduction, erasing the face’s repletion, paring it down to its (purportedly) essentially meaningful forms. Every detail added on top of this basic structure was at best a kind of elaboration of its original significance, and at worst a redundant distortion, pure noise. Lavater even went so far as to invest the silhouette with historical primacy, suggesting that “drawing and painting, it is probable, originated in shades.”[[151]](#footnote-151) This gesture indicates the foundational position of the silhouette within Lavater’s system. It is the origin point of one of his most crucial distinctions – between the “hard” and the “soft” forms of the face. He saw this dichotomy as the basis of his project’s distinctiveness, as he explained (and this will be our final reference to this historic meeting of minds) in his exchange with Joseph II: “I likewise believe that I may claim an opinion of my own…since I have employed my attention more on the firm, defined, and defineable parts of the human physiognomy, than on the moveable, momentary, and accidental.”[[152]](#footnote-152) One could scarcely imagine a better demonstration of the circularity that underpins Lavater’s thinking here: Q) Which parts of the face are defineable? A) Those which are defined. And vice versa.

The presumption that only the hard or firm features of the face – essentially, the underlying skeletal structure – are essentially meaningful is the organising principle of Lavaterian physiognomy. The mobile, elastic, changeable features, those parts that his media cannot capture and which threaten to contradict his ontology, are excised from the system. Moreover, firmness is also invested with a normative moral value, indicating virtue, resolution, decisiveness etc., whilst softness or curvature denotes weakness, vulgarity, degeneracy. For instance: “If the parts of the countenance, if the limbs are proportionate, according to right-line, perpendicular admeasurement, then man is then beautiful, well-formed, intelligent, strong, firm, noble, in a superior degree…”[[153]](#footnote-153) And also: “Firm lips, firm character; weak lips, and quick in motion, weak and wavering character.”[[154]](#footnote-154) Not only is hardness predicated as the baseline of physiognomic significance, it is also supposed to serve as an index of personal worth. Softness, meanwhile, is subject to a double sanction, being at once voided of profundity and associated with a range of negative traits.

The hard/soft dichotomy itself was the basis of the technical distinction by which Lavater defined the boundaries of his system. If physiognomy directed itself towards the definite, firm, unchanging aspects of the face, then “pathognomy” was the study of its mobile, soft, transient elements. His purpose here was not solely to define the expressive and affective elements of the face as outside of his field of study – he further wished to establish physiognomy as the fundamental science out of which the knowledge of pathognomy emerged. “Character at rest,” he dictated, “is displayed by the form of the solid and the appearance of the moveable parts, while at rest. Character impassioned is manifested by the moveable parts, in motion. The former shows what man is in general; the latter what he becomes at particular moments: or, the one what he might be, the other what he is. The first is the root and stem of the second, the soil in which it is planted.”[[155]](#footnote-155)

Lavater insisted that the physiognomic structure of a face should determine the range of its possible pathognomic meanings. This is a defensive assertion, calculated to guard against the counter-argument that the plausibility of physiognomy was in fact derivative of the far more certain and far less extensive claims of pathognomy. As his contemporary, the dramatist and philosopher Gotthold Lessing put it, “Lavater has successfully dressed up and disguised physiognomics, which is destined to remain uncertain and unreliable unto eternity, by cloaking it in so many less debatable and wholly certain assertions, so that its detractors are the ones who take on the appearance of being unreasonable.”[[156]](#footnote-156) To insulate his theories from this critique, Lavater took every measure to suppress and subordinate the pathognomical. His use of the silhouette was a crucial part of this strategy, the ultimate consequence of which was a model of the face that was rationalized down to a schematic skeleton of points and vectors.

In the final analysis, Lavater believed that four lines were sufficient to disclose the full meaning of a particular countenance – from face-on, the contour of the mouth (either when closed or fully open) and the outline of the eyelid, and in profile, from the ear to the nose, and the jaw to the brow. Once again, the forehead and eyebrows were generally supposed to denote intellectual qualities, the eyes and nose properties relating to morality and the will, and the mouth and chin, appetites and passions, although in practice Lavater was always happy to abandon these distinctions to suit his proximal ends. Not only were these four lines supposed to contain all the information required to produce an exhaustive reading of a person’s character, they were also ostensibly so mutually dependent that given just one to study, the experienced physiognomist ought to be able to derive all the others. “In order to acquire this perfection,” Lavater recommended, “it is necessary to draw nothing but the outlines of the upper eyelid and the mouth of the same person, and to draw them, continually, on the same paper; each pair of such lines, separately, on one hand, that they may the more easily be placed side by side, compared, classed.”[[157]](#footnote-157)

Draughtsmanship performed a vital mnemonic function within Lavater’s system, but it was a also a crucial analytic tool, allowing him to pare away layers of redundant meaning until all that was left was the “general, assignable, communicable signs of the powers of mind; or…the internal faculties of man.”[[158]](#footnote-158) Effectively, his system proposed that all of this could be extrapolated from a single line, an assertion that paralleled Lavater’s Dutch contemporary Petrus Camper. Camper popularised the extremely influential theory of the “facial line,” which dictated that the angle made by the intersection of Lavater’s latter pair of lines (ear to nose and jaw to brow in profile) was the basis of a hierarchy of beauty and intelligence, with the smoothly vertical countenances of the Greco-Romans at the top and the supposedly marked prognathism of Africans at the bottom, with contemporary Europeans languishing somewhere around the middle.[[159]](#footnote-159) Both Lavater and Camper grasped the face as an essentially quantitative phenomenon, meaning that their theories not only offered to decode a face’s meaning, but also to provide a metric according to which all faces could be objectively ranked. One of Lavater’s fantasies (never fulfilled) was to refine his system until it became a purely mathematical endeavour. To this end, Gray tells us, he invented a device he called the “*Stirnmaaß*” (roughly, “forehead measurer”) for taking cranial measurements. “The use of this [machine],” he declared, “will allow us to generate, over time, a universally comprehensible and practical proportional table for all the capacities of the human soul.”[[160]](#footnote-160) This device represents Lavater’s thought boiled down to its essentials – a mechanism for reifying both the face and the self as a set of quantitative factors, susceptible to universal comparison and ranking.

Lavaterian physiognomy appealed to its audience in the first instance as a technique for training one’s perceptual acuity, an education in the sensory pleasures of observing and decoding the body’s meaningful characteristics. It ends, however, by collapsing the body-mind dualism into a single table of measurements, and reducing the face to a quantifiable distribution of edges, spaces and angles. This is, just as Deleuze and Guattari envisioned it, the face-as-grid, a figure which simultaneously establishes a general set of boundaries within which all subjects are captured, whilst also providing the internal principle according to which they can be sorted and ranked each against the other. “Faces,” they write, “are not basically individual: they define zones of frequency or probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations.”[[161]](#footnote-161) Lavater’s system produces this vision of the face with unimpeachable literality – each face is in fact little more than a particular distribution of geometric co-ordinates whose meaning is realized relative to the structure as a whole. It isolates each individual with perfect specificity whilst simultaneously allocating it a position with a totalising hierarchy. In this way, Lavaterian physiognomy mediates between the need of the individual to be recognised as such, and the desire for a naturalized hierarchy capable of organising all of these individual subjects into a stable social organism.

**Lavaterizing for Fun and Profit**

The *Physiognomic Fragments* were an international sensation. The original German edition was immediately followed by the author’s own French translation; in 1789 volume one of the first English version was published by Joseph Johnson, translated from the French by Henry Hunter. These first editions were, as noted above, generally fairly expensive. They became popular with reading groups, who began to meet for communal “Lavaterizing,” seeking to characterize individuals on the basis of their image or silhouettes.”[[162]](#footnote-162) Subsequent editions, however, such as Holcroft’s English translation from the German, were released in a slimmed-down octavo format, within the reach of more modest incomes. Percival notes that the editor of the second French edition expressly declared that his text was designed for a broader audience, “rather than being destined for the ‘*cabinets des curieux et des riches marchands*’ which had been the market for the first edition.” “After these,” Percival continues, “followed a rush of abridgements, re-editions and pirate editions. In the early nineteenth century, a radically different aspect of Lavater’s physiognomy emerged when portable editions for ‘on the spot’ readings became fashionable.”[[163]](#footnote-163) It may have begun life as a kind of coffee table book-cum-parlour game for wealthy merchants, but the *Physiognomic Fragments* rapidly diffused itself downwards through the strata of European literary culture.

In his history of the German physiognomic tradition “from Lavater to Auschwitz”, Gray suggests that the remarkable popularity of physiognomy across late eighteenth-century Europe may have been linked to the “transition from the absolutist state to civil society.”[[164]](#footnote-164) As Marx and Engels explain in *The German Ideology*, the shift from a society ordered around the feudal estates, with each individual’s rights and obligations more or less fixed from birth, to one organised according to socioeconomic classes, wherein a person’s position is shaped by the division of labour and their relation to broader economic conditions, creates “a division within the life of each individual, insofar as it is personal and insofar as it is determined by some branch of labour and the conditions pertaining to it.”[[165]](#footnote-165) “In the estate,” they continue, “a nobleman always remains a nobleman, a commoner always a commoner, apart from his other relationships, a quality inseparable from his individuality. The division between the personal and the class individual, the accidental nature of the conditions of life for the individual, appears only with the emergence of the class, which is itself a product of the bourgeoisie.”[[166]](#footnote-166) In other words, the development of class society amounted to a radical de-essentialisation of the relationship between the individual subject and their place in the social order. Whereas a person’s social station had once been experienced as an integral part of their being, with the advent of class it increasingly became a secondary quality imposed on them by external forces – no more a skin, but a suit of clothes that could perhaps be thrown off or exchanged.

Indeed, there is a sense in which this sartorial metaphor should be taken perfectly literally. The gradual collapse of the political and socioeconomic structures of feudalism was accompanied by the corresponding disintegration of its symbolic order, a strict hierarchy which delimited the right to possess and exhibit certain signifiers (i.e, regalia, religious icons, royal seals, certain textiles and dyes) to specific classes. In *Simulations*, Baudrillard describes the situation as follows:

There is no such thing as fashion in a society of caste and rank, since one is assigned a place irrevocably, and so class mobility is non-existent. An interdiction protects the signs and assures them a total clarity; each sign then refers unequivocally to a status…In caste societies, feudal or archaic, *cruel* societies, the signs are limited in number, and are not widely diffused, each one functions with its full value as interdiction, each is a reciprocal obligation between castes, clans or persons.[[167]](#footnote-167)

As feudal authority waned, this fixed symbolic order also lost its clarity. Signs were detached from their place in the hierarchy, and freed to circulate within the broader social terrain staked out by discourses of citizenship and rights on the one hand, and the currents of the market on the other. So-called “sumptuary laws,” which had legally mandated the kinds of garments and consumer goods available to members of a particular profession or social stratum, fell into abeyance and were eventually cancelled. The parties best positioned to take advantage of this situation belonged, naturally, to the ascendant middle-class, merchants and professionals who possessed both the disposable income to acquire signifiers of status and luxury as well as the increasing sense, given their burgeoning economic and political influence, that they were entitled to them. This transfer of symbolic power harboured a disruptive, even potentially revolutionary force. Whereas the harmonious constitution of the social order had once been directly expressed as an immutable symbolic hierarchy, the newfound mobility and reproducibility of the signifier reflected the dangerous contingency of the post-feudal polity.

In this context, the appeal of Lavaterian physiognomy can be understood in two complementary senses. On the one hand, it appealed to a desire for self-fashioning and, not to put too fine a point on it, self-flattery on the part of the rising bourgeoisie. Whilst it is true that Lavater recommended his method as a means of rooting out iniquity and falsehood, and that his sample readings are frequently less than complimentary to his subjects, it also seems reasonable to assume that most of the attendees of the physiognomical salons which sprang up in the wake of the publication of the *Physiognomic Fragments* didn’t come just to be told that their misshapen forehead was an indubitable sign of imbecility. A considerable part of the allure of physiognomy, as suggested above, was that it presented individual subjectivity as a rich, complex and sensuous experience. After all, who does not enjoy being read a list of one’s admirable qualities, or to see oneself reflected (to advantage, of course) in the mirror of an impartial and objective assessor? By sending off their portrait to Lavater, an individual could see their image reproduced on the very same page as Alexander the Great, Louis XIV and Attila the Hun – a representational levelling which mirrored the political demands of contemporary liberalism, such as the extension of the franchise and equal rights before the law.

At the same time, however, physiognomy was also calculated to offer a sense of comforting stability at a time where it seemed that the world was turning upside down. As the signifying structures which had buttressed the old political order were dismantled, Lavater’s method promised to substitute in the possibility of reading the markers of a person’s mental faculties, moral worth and social station directly from the body itself. The notion that the soul of a man shows through in his face implied a new visual order, in which the basis of a just social hierarchy would be found not in the symbols of time-honoured traditions, but rather in the natural constitution of the body. Even as it was a symptom of the redistribution of material privilege and political influence in the transition from absolutist to constitutionally governed societies, physiognomy represented a principle according to which the new balance of class power could be reconstituted on a stronger basis than ever.

Some useful context for this line of argument can be found in Terry Eagleton’s writing on *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. He sees the philosophical discourse of aesthetics, which was reintroduced into the mainstream of European thought by eighteenth-century German thinkers such as Baumgarten and Schiller, likewise as a response to the crisis of absolutism. In this context, he explains, aesthetics should be understood as “a discourse of the body…[that] refers not in the first place to art, but, as the Greek *aesthesis* would suggest, to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought.”[[168]](#footnote-168) The goal for the philosopher of aesthetics was to develop a technical language capable of mediating between these two realms – that of sense, sentiment and desire on the one hand, and critical reason on the other. The political import of this project was as follows:

Once the bourgeoisie has dismantled the centralizing political apparatus of absolutism, either in fantasy or reality, it finds itself bereft of some of the institutions which had previously organized social life as a whole. The question therefore arises as to where it is to locate a sense of unity powerful enough to reproduce itself by. In economic life, individuals are structurally isolated and antagonistic; at the political level there would seem nothing but abstract rights to link one subject to the other. This is one reason why the ‘aesthetic’ realm of sentiments, affections and spontaneous bodily habits comes to assume the significance that it does.[[169]](#footnote-169)

By providing a language that opens up the “realm of sentiments, affections and spontaneous bodily habits” to philosophical reason, aesthetics responds to this political crisis with a promise to rediscover the principle of social order, not in human-made institutions but within human nature itself, whether in the form of a moral instinct, rational self-interest or the categorical imperative. As Eagleton says, “What is at stake here is nothing less than the production of an entirely new kind of human subject – one which, like the work of art itself, discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity, rather than in some oppressive external power. The liberated subject is the one who has appropriated the law as the very principle of its own autonomy.”[[170]](#footnote-170) Lavaterian physiognomy can be seen as an extraordinarily literal-minded manifestation of this programme, proposing a model of the subject grounded not on an abstract theory of the sentiments, but instead on the empirical observation of the correspondence between the internal and external structures of the human being. The blueprint for the post-feudal social order, Lavater suggested, would be found in the harmonious forms of the human face.

**“Each Man is a Sovereign Prince”**

Lavater, like so many thousands of his contemporaries, ultimately found himself to have an uncomfortably personal stake in the political upheavals of the day. He was supportive of the early days of the French Revolution, wherein he “imagined that he saw…the energies of the human mind burst forth with new and indescribable energy [and] exulted in the idea that a great nation had shaken off the shackles of slavery, and asserted the dignity of human nature.”[[171]](#footnote-171) These warm feelings persisted only until it became clear that the revolution, rather than merely extending modest political rights to a section of the propertied middle classes, would also result (temporarily, as it transpired) in the liquidation of the monarchy, the disestablishment of the church and a far more radical levelling of the social and political order, at which point Lavater took to the pulpit to proselytize desperately against it. His convictions in this regard probably contributed to his untimely end, which came in 1801 as the result of a wound sustained in an unfortunate altercation with a French grenadier during the Republican Army’s occupation of Zurich.

Lavater’s personal politics, then, amounted to a form of conservative liberalism, favouring a limited restructuring of the political order to accommodate the demands of the prosperous bourgeoisie without countenancing any further extension of the franchise or redistribution of wealth. This ideology was entirely reflected in his physiognomic theory, which described a universal human subject whose cardinal virtues just so happened to comprise a combination of stolid, paternalistic moralism with keen-eyed entrepreneurial pluck. “Consider each,” he wrote, “as if he were single in the universe: then wilt thou discover powers and excellencies in him which, abstractedly of comparison, deserve all attention and admiration. Compare him afterwards with others; his similarity, his dissimilarity…How wilt thou value the individuality, the indispensability of his being!”[[172]](#footnote-172) Unsurprisingly, at the heart of these purportedly all-inclusive bromides was a definite historically specific figure. Every person achieves their true value, he suggested, when they are considered alone against the backdrop of an empty universe, abstracted from all social relations. The task of physiognomy was to reveal their independent qualities such that they could later be compared and ranked against their fellows. Lavaterian theory treated each individual like a petit-bourgeois property holder, presiding over a native stock of faculties and characteristics which it was their responsibility to husband as judiciously as possible. His self-improvement rhetoric appealed directly to this model of personhood as a way of efficiently registering and cultivating one’s own powers, the better to compete in a world of atomised individuals whose fortunes fall and rise precisely according to their ability to capitalise on their inherent capabilities.

It was Lavater’s belief that any sustained moral improvements on the part of an individual would, in time, show themselves in the face: “Each frequently-repeated change, form, and state of countenance, impresses, at length, a durable trait on the soft and flexible parts of the face. The stronger the change, and the oftener it is repeated, the stronger, deeper, and more indelible is the trait.”[[173]](#footnote-173) At the same time, he was at pains to carefully circumscribe the limits of the individual’s capacity for transformation. Indeed, in the final analysis it seems that the purpose of physiognomy was as much to remind every person of their place in life as it was to inspire self-improvement. On this issue, Lavater declared, “My opinion…is that man is as free as the bird in the cage; he has a determinate space for action and sensation, beyond which he cannot pass. As each man has a particular circumference of body, so has he likewise a certain sphere of action.”[[174]](#footnote-174) An individual’s physiognomy defined certain limits within which their moral worth might rise or sink through the effects of environment, education and effort of will.

In attempting to describe the nature of these limits, Lavater employed an extremely telling metaphor: “Each must remain what he is, nor can he extend or enlarge himself beyond a certain size: each man is a sovereign prince; but, whether small or great, only in his own principality.”[[175]](#footnote-175) Human sociality, according to this vision, is at the most basic level ordered along the same lines as the political landscape of eighteenth-century Germany – which is to say, an aggregation of innumerable petty dukes, counts and princelings, each despotically lording it over their own small territory. Here, we can see the extent to which physiognomy’s relatively liberal account of the autonomous bourgeois subject was in fact predicated on a reification of the absolutist social order, according to which the powers expropriated from absolute monarchs would be redistributed according to the extent of one’s properties (in both the material and the characterological sense). Everybody, Lavater proposed, gets to be a king, except some of us are more kingly than others.

The world-picture of physiognomy, then, was of society as a biological meritocracy, in which wealth and power ought to, and actually almost always does, accrue to the most beautiful and the most virtuous. Extrapolated to the level of population, Lavater’s theories were inevitably nothing more than a florid exercise in confirmation bias, as he found his prejudices reflected in the miserable aspect of the most deprived:

I walk in the multitude, I contemplate the vulgar; I go through villages, small towns, and great, and every where, among all ranks, I behold deformity; I view the lamentable, the dreadful ravages of destruction. I constantly find that the vulgar, collectively, whether of nation, town, or village, are the most distorted. I am afflicted at the sight of ugliness, so universal; and my wounded soul, my offended eyes, wander till they find some man, but moderately handsome, on whom they are fixed; although he by no means is the perfection of human beauty. That beauteous image of happiness haunts me, which man might possess, but from which man, alas! is so remote.[[176]](#footnote-176)

Apparently, the experience of walking out the front door was for Lavater like stepping into a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. But the seeming chaos of this hellscape of recessive chins and sloping brows actually implies a clear and immutable hierarchy. Whilst “deformity” is evident “among all ranks,” it is the poor in general who are most hideous and therefore least susceptible of improvement, even if there lurks amongst their number the odd “moderately handsome” Cinderella who might prove fit for something better than a life of wretched penury. This hierarchical principle is, predictably enough, even more pronounced when Lavater turns to the issue of race, whereupon he constructs precisely the sort of evolutionary ladder which would become commonplace in the next century, with the denizens of Western Europe and Scandinavia at the top of a sequence which descends gradually through various categories of human towards the baseline state of “animality.”

The Lavaterian recipe for a just society was a strict hierarchy that reserved a certain latitude for the enterprising individual to better himself. Indeed, the individual occupies a position of exceptionality with regard to the system as a whole. At points in his work, he insisted that physiognomic knowledge was only accessible to a preordained elect: “No one whose person is not well formed can become a good physiognomist. The handsomest were the greatest painters…No one, therefore, ought to enter the sanctuary of physiognomy who has a debased mind, an ill-formed forehead, a blinking eye, or a distorted mouth.”[[177]](#footnote-177) These were indeed lofty entry requirements, but then again, how many people would count themselves outside of this exclusive set? There were, it seems, only two basic qualifications required to be a physiognomist: 1) to have bought Lavater’s book, and 2) to possess just enough vanity not to be disgusted by one’s own image. The reward for these accomplishments was access to the knowledge that would place oneself outside of the physiognomic hierarchy, or at least allow one to game the system to one’s advantage. The iron law of physiognomy – that one’s facial features define a set of potentialities that the individual can never ultimately transcend – becomes one of those rules that only ever applies to other people. The prospects of our friends and neighbours might be irrevocably hobbled by lumpy noses and jutting underbites, but *my* face undoubtedly contains marks of greatness, howsoever they might be hidden from the uneducated eye. Physiognomy constructs the subject *as exception*, and through this means purchases its consent to an ideology which in fact places powerful constraints upon the social, economic and experiential possibilities of all but the most privileged individuals.

By locating the basis for a harmonious social order in a purportedly biological hierarchy, Lavater’s project anticipates one of the fundamental assumptions of the various eugenics movements that would succeed it in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It differed ideologically from these later systems in one key respect, however. Eugenics proposed revolutionary means for reactionary ends, offering a prospectus for the total restructuring of society in the name of preserving a degenerating class hierarchy. Lavaterian physiognomy, however, was a thoroughly small-c conservative enterprise. He advanced scarcely any concrete prescriptions for the reorganisation of society along physiognomic lines, and offered only the broadest and most anodyne of normative ethical statements. At the political level, the goal of his work was not to advocate a programme for social transformation, but rather to offer the basis of a détente between the existing absolutist order and the forces of bourgeois liberalism, the better to unite them against the revolutionary forces that simmered across the continent. By making a space for the exercise of personal autonomy, physiognomy offered a sop to the ambitions of the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie; by restricting the limits within which this autonomy could be exercised, it ensured the overall stability of class society; by framing this model of political subjectivity in terms of sensory enjoyment, spiritual edification and self-improvement it offered an ideological compromise between these two potentially antagonistic imperatives that operated within the recently politicised field of sense, affect and desire.

**The General Parallelism of Humanity**

It is at this specific point that Lavater’s ideology and his method converge. We observed above, *vide* Deleuze and Guattari, how Lavater’s use of representational media, and particularly the silhouette, turns the face into a grid. We can now state more precisely what this grid is supposed to delineate. In Lavater’s own words: “Every man who, without some external accident of force, does not remain in the general parallelism of humanity, is a monster born; and the more he remains in the purest, horizontal, perpendicular, parallelism of the human form, the more is he perfect, manly, and divine.”[[178]](#footnote-178) The broad outline of the face defines the outer limit separating humanity from monstrosity. Whoever falls within that “general parallelism” is afforded the status of a human being, with a unique suite of personal characteristics, a predetermined scope for self-improvement and a set of universal civil and legal rights. At the same time, however, differences in the face’s internal dimensions (the angle of the forehead, shape of the nose, contour of the chin etc.) provide a set of criteria (intelligence, moral fortitude, strength of will and so on) according to which all of the constituents of this universal category can be valued, sorted and ranked. The grid of the face simultaneously projects a radically inclusive horizon of humanity and offers a precise metric that allows this undifferentiated human mass to be organised into groups with different levels of status and entitlement.

The source of this “parallelism” metaphor is instructive. Lavater writes: ““Nature forms man according to one standard; which, however various, always continues, like the pentograph, in the same parallelism and proportion.”[[179]](#footnote-179) The “pentograph” (or more commonly, “pantograph”) is an articulated, adjustable frame, used for copying drawings at scale. As Freund explains:

The pantograph is made of rods in the shape of two joined parallelograms. The device moves in a horizontal plane, one parallelogram passing over a design, the other over a blank paper ready to receive the design. With a dry stylus attached to the corner of the first parallelogram, the operator follows the contours of the design. An inked stylus, attached to the second, automatically reproduces the design on the blank page at a scale determined by the distance between each stylus.[[180]](#footnote-180)

Once again, it is a technology of visual reproduction which provides Lavater with his theory’s organising principle. The face is a controlling framework, determining the harmonious relationship between two differently scaled but mutually regulating forms – society and the individual. In this sense it functions simultaneously as ideological fiction and control mechanism. Insofar as the social order is made in the image of the individual face, it is presented as the natural expression of innate human properties, whilst to the extent that the individual face is formed in the mould of the broader social body, it symbolises their implied consent to its laws. The only way to move beyond this frame is to break it, and thereby to step beyond the human and into the realm of monstrosity, to become faceless, stateless, a kind of *homo sacer*.

Lavater presented his readers with the human face as a model of the social contract, proposing a form of citizenship based not on feudal obligation, but rather on the innate humanity of each person. There is, ostensibly, only one qualifying criterion for entry into this “brotherhood of man”: to signify as face, to be legibly to society as a set of characterological traits manifested in a certain arrangement of facial features. To signify as a face secures one’s position as a unique individual with inherent worth and potential, but in the same moment rigorously circumscribes this worth and potential relative to a universal and immutable moral and intellectual hierarchy. One is simultaneously welcomed into the social body and assigned a more or less fixed station within it on the basis of one’s inherent characteristics as they appear in one’s face. In this way, the face reconciles the principles of universal liberty and human rights with a class-based social order, not at the level of philosophical abstraction, constitutional legality or political institutions, but as a biological fact inscribed upon the human body. The only just society, it follows, is the one that allows the innate inequities marked in the faces of all men to shake out as faithfully as possible, most likely through such purportedly neutral and meritocratic structures as the free market, the public sphere and the bourgeois state.

**“*La République se vit à visage découvert*”**

The connection between the human face and this classically liberal account of citizenship may in fact be Lavater’s enduring legacy to a continent that has otherwise forgotten him. The synonymy between the exposed, open face and active participation in the public sphere, with its attendant entitlements and rights, has only grown more explicit and formal in the centuries since his death. The practical necessity of revealing one’s face to various bureaucratic and security apparatuses as the implicit precondition of accessing what we might think of as the fundamental dues of the citizen, such as international travel, welfare or banking services, is self-evident. More intriguing, though, is the persistence of the face as a political signifier, directly addressed to the problem of who is and is not entitled to claim European citizenship, entry to the public sphere, or even the barest existential necessities. Over the past couple of decades, for instance, we have seen bans on facial coverings in public spaces effectuated, to different degrees, in Germany, France, Denmark and elsewhere, accompanied by political rhetoric which explicitly associates these measures with the defence of “Western values” against the purported incursion of Islamic law.

At the 2016 conference of Germany’s Christian Democratic Union party, Chancellor Angela Merkel pronounced that, “with [regard to] inter-human communication, which plays a crucial role [here]…we say, “Show your face.” This is why the full-face veil is not appropriate and should be outlawed wherever it is legally possible – it does not belong to us.”[[181]](#footnote-181) France, meanwhile, introduced a 2010 ban on face-covering in public spaces behind the following slogan: “*La République se vit à visage découvert*”, which can be translated as “The Republic lives openly”, or more literally as “The Republic lives with an uncovered face.” Posters and pamphlets which were widely circulated throughout the country to publicise the initiative bore the image of a statue of Marianne, Goddess of Liberty and symbol of the Republican virtues of liberty, equality and fraternity, known best for her prominent role in Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (1830).[[182]](#footnote-182) Here, the face is identified with both the idea of Europe as a territory and a community – as a homeland – and as the embodiment of a set of putatively universal human values, founded on open communication, human brotherhood and equality before the law. Those women who cover their faces have wilfully placed themselves outside of this fellowship, and hence voluntarily surrendered their claims on citizenship and humanity. They have chosen not to be Europeans, and therefore deserve to be treated as such. Whilst this figuration is evidently a tactical manoeuvre within the broader context of neoliberal Europe’s shameful cultivation of Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, its effectiveness is predicated on the intuitive nature of this association between the open face and the idea of Europe as territory, polity and ideology. In turn, this equation is only plausible because it pretends that the ideal of liberal citizenship emerges naturally and self-evidently from the face itself. The example of Lavater is therefore an invaluable corrective, demonstrating the extent to which this face is a techno-ideological construct, responding to a set of political upheavals which no doubt felt as urgent and dire at the time as the current conjuncture does to us today.

**Certain Precious Moments**

Lavater’s work stands at a transitional moment in the history of the relationship between the face, the subject and visual technology. In attempting to derive a system for interpreting the face’s meaning directly from its visible structures, he simultaneously sought to discover the principle of a harmonious social hierarchy within the innate qualities of the human itself – qualities which could be grasped in its face. Its essential ideological function was to control the potentially revolutionary subjective energies released by the transition from feudal absolutism to a relatively more pluralistic, democratic and open society. Physiognomy gave the subject its due whilst simultaneously constraining its scope for action, a double function encapsulated in the trope of the face-as-grid, a form which regulated the outer limits of the human as such just as it organised and rationalised its internal features. In this way the face became a symbolic embodiment of liberal utopianism, a vision of a society of free individuals spontaneously assenting to the laws which emerged from the essence of their human souls. It also heralds the birth of a new kind of political subject – the open-faced citizen, member of the universal human fellowship, but simultaneously bearing the bodily marks of class, race, gender and a whole host of other properties, written upon their countenance for all to see.

Lavater’s compulsion to investigate the face as an empirical object drove him to great feats of innovation, particularly in terms of the quantity, quality and variety of the images he used to demonstrate his theorems. His extravagantly illustrated texts were genuinely remarkable for their time, with the *Monthly Magazine* hailing the first English translation of Lavater’s essays as “The finest printed book which has ever appeared in this or any other country.”[[183]](#footnote-183) He was in the vanguard of a certain species of mass media, one which sought to place images in the hands and homes of as many people as possible, to empower them to study and interpret them, and quite literally to reshape the way that they looked at their own faces, those of their fellows, and the visual world in general. The ultimate expression of this project was his use of the silhouette, the media form which more than any other produced his idiosyncratic hermeneutic propositions. The silhouette removed the face from its relational context, converting into a free-floating signifier whose meaning could be construed on a plane of abstract objectivity. It also reduced its manifold forms down to the hard lines of the facial grid, organising its significance along the axis of the hard/soft dichotomy. This double gesture was his major theoretical bequest to his successors. The desire to excise the face from its socially embedded context, and to divide its meanings into firm and fleshy, permanent and fleeting, profound and superficial, is one that will recur again and again, even to the present day.

However, Lavater’s work also expresses a persistent frustration with the limitations of the silhouette. Even as it gives his philosophy its fundamental form, he chafes against its poverty of detail, its anonymising effect, its dry abstraction of everyday vision. It provided an invaluable schematic, suitable for closeted study and rhetorical demonstration. But Lavater dreamed of physiognomy becoming a kind of biopower, capable of retraining perception, reordering knowledge and renewing the lapsed moral economy of his time. “[T]he more man shall be studied by man,” he rhapsodized, “the more physiognomy shall become scientific, accurately defined, and capable of being taught, the more it shall then become the science of sciences; and in reality, no longer a science, but sensibility, a prompt and convincing inspection of the human heart.”[[184]](#footnote-184) So long as his method was shackled to the arid medium of the silhouette, there remained a fundamental barrier between his academic theory and the mode of spontaneous, everyday intuition to which he aspired. And so, as much as his work is a philosophy of and through the silhouette, there are also moments where one can sense him reaching beyond it, longing for the medium which will allow him to fulfil his deranged prospectus.

In one of his many effusive elucidations of the art of physiognomy, Lavater wrote the following:

Important to the student are certain precious moments for observation.

The moment of sudden, unforeseen, unprepared meeting. The moments of welcome, and farewell.

The moment antecedent to the impetuous burst of passion; the moment of it subsiding; especially when interrupted by the entrance of some respectable person. The power of dissimulation, and the still remaining traces of passion are then displayed.

The moment of compassion and emotion; of weeping and anger of the soul; of envy and of friendship. The moment, especially, of the greatest degree of tranquillity, and of passion; when the man is entirely himself, or entirely forgets himself.[[185]](#footnote-185)

In his wish to capture these “precious moments” of expressive revelation, he betrayed a desire which went beyond the limits of the sketch, the silhouette or the bust, but that he also knew must constantly elude his ordinary powers of perception. In passages such as these, he expressed a need for a new medium, one capable of seizing these decisive instants in all of their intensity, arresting and offering up their motion for study and decipherment, yet without attenuating any of the texture and detail to which they owed their effect. He longed for a technology which would reveal the face anew. His dream would be fulfilled in the next century, some forty years after his death.

**Chapter Two: Without Inscription**

The first people to be reproduced entered the visual space of photography [*Blickraum der Photographie*] with their innocence intact – or rather, without inscription [*Beschriftung*]. Newspapers were still a luxury item which people seldom bought, preferring to consult them in the coffeehouse; photography had not yet become a journalistic tool, and ordinary people had yet to see their names in print. The human countenance had a silence about it in which the gaze rested.

Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”[[186]](#footnote-186)

Almost as soon as there was photography, there was the photographic portrait. The earliest extant photo-portraits date to 1839, the same year that Louis Daguerre and Henry Fox Talbot announced their simultaneous creations to the world. The daguerreotype, which produced a mesmerizingly sharp and detailed image, and the calotype, which yielded a paper negative that could then be reproduced multiple times through contact printing, established the basic technical apparatuses underlying modern photography. No sooner were these techniques made public than a host of practitioners, some famous but many more whose names have been lost to history, set about capturing the image of the human subject. These early creations now feel thrillingly alien – starchy, tenebrous artefacts whose sitters seem frozen before the camera out of some combination of fear and good manners. Unknown couples stare rigidly, like hostages posed in front of unmarked white backdrops. Young women huddle around funereal monuments and shyly commit themselves to a new kind of posterity (the graveyard being one of the ideal places to find the peace, quiet and abundance of natural light that the early photographer required.) The weirdness of the situation (for subject, photographer and viewer) is palpable in the texture of the image, a kind of surface tension that repels the gaze and traps its subjects in a plane of discoloured shadows. On the other side from us, we watch the human face begin to pass out of its murky prehistory, and into what Walter Benjamin calls “the visual space of photography.”

One of the earliest surviving photographs in which a face is clearly discernible is a picture of the American photographic pioneer Robert Cornelius, dated October 1839. The image has the distinction of being perhaps the first ever photographic self-portrait – absent any second party to take his picture for him, Cornelius was obliged to uncover the lens and then dash round to the front of the camera to become his own sitter.[[187]](#footnote-187) He stands a little off centre, as if leaning out of the path of the camera’s gaze; his arms are folded, his lips pursed, and his eyes narrowed, squinting with a strange indeterminacy, so that it is not easy to tell whether he is looking back into the lens or at some midair spot to the left of the camera. His entire demeanour suggests suspicion, hostility, and a kind of defensive reticence, a desire to withhold some still secret and inviolate part of himself that he fears will be irrevocably stripped away by the photographic process. But what might he wish to protect? Nothing less, perhaps, than the privacy of his own image, the inherence of its possible meanings within the context of his bodily presence.

The stern, standoffish atmosphere that emanates from this and many of the earliest photo-portraits is, of course, to some extent the product of material conditions. Chief among these was the problem of exposure time. Depending on the quality of the lighting, subjects could be required to hold their pose for anything up to thirty minutes, often with lamps, reflectors or direct sunlight glaring into their eyes, which had to be kept stoically peeled, since any blinking would risk blurring the image. As Benjamin notes, this contingency obliged photographers to engage in various degrees of sadism, from “head clamps and knees braces” at one end of the scale, to an array of kitsch impedimenta (Doric columns, fur-draped ottomans, “pedestals, balustrades and little oval tables”) at the other, against which their flagging subjects could be propped. To this extent, the photographer’s studio represented an “ambiguous…place between execution and representation, between torture chamber and throne room.”[[188]](#footnote-188) Under such circumstances, as Mary Warner Marien recounts, no less an authority than the *Daguerrean Journal* (an American publication “Devoted to the Daguerreian and Photogenic Arts”) recommended “resolute indifference” as “the best expression for a Daguerreotype.”[[189]](#footnote-189) It was only as technical advances shortened exposure times that more relaxed and varied demeanours began to be codified as the proper subjects of photographic representation.

***Seated Couple*: The Early Portrait-Photo as Encounter**

There is perhaps no better example of the effort towards “resolute indifference” in practice than another of Cornelius’ portraits: *Seated Couple* (c.1840). In this picture, the titular twosome sit side-by-side before a tatty curtain, walleyed and stiff as death in their Sunday best. There is, to say the least, a certain amateurishness to the composition. The lighting is particularly eccentric, seeming to fall across the image from left to right at an angle of roughly forty-five degrees to the picture plane. This means that the top right-hand corner of the image is overexposed, bleaching one half of the woman’s head of colour and texture. The top-left, meanwhile, is rather gloomy, the man’s face bisected by a shadow running from his brow to his chin, obscuring the features of the right hemisphere. Their expressions are reserved to the point of blankness, each feature set in what would have been the most sustainable position over the course of the long exposure. The striking exception to this, of course, is their eyes, which bug out of their sockets with the strain of keeping them open (this, perhaps, accounts for the curious lighting – Cornelius didn’t want to blind his sitters by illuminating their faces head-on, but otherwise lacked the means or the expertise to light them evenly.)

*Seated Couple* is in many respects an unprepossessing photograph. On top of the technical deficiencies mentioned above, it lacks the startling clarity, tonal complexity or baroque staging that variously distinguish the most celebrated examples of early portrait-photography. There is little that is striking or characteristic about the couple themselves either in their dress or their bearing, excepting their extraordinary rigidity. The picture expresses barely a sliver of insight into their lives, their relationship or what possessed them to have it done in the first place. What it does achieve, however, is a remarkably intense evocation of the early portrait-photo *as encounter*, as described by Benjamin in the following terms:

These pictures were made in rooms where every client was confronted, in the person of the photographer, with a technician of the latest school; whereas the photographer was confronted, in the person of every client, with a member of a rising class equipped with an aura that had seeped into the very folds of the man’s frock coat or floppy cravat. For this aura was by no means the mere product of a primitive camera. Rather, in this early period subject and technique were as exactly congruent as they become incongruent in the period of decline that immediately followed.[[190]](#footnote-190)

The historical dimension of Benjamin’s idea here is shaped by a specifically European context (i.e. the transition of the bourgeoisie from revolutionary to ruling class following the uprisings of 1848) that does not necessarily apply to the protagonists of *Seated Couple*, but his notion of the congruence between “subject” and “technique” applies perfectly to the existential situation that the photograph dramatizes. That is to say, what the photograph communicates so vividly is the sense of a bewilderingly liminal, radically new kind of experience transpiring on both sides of the camera.

Cornelius, for his part, was wrestling not only with an unwieldy and truculent new machine, but also the very notion of what it meant to be “a photographer.” He and his fellow first-generation photo-portraitists – figures like David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, Félix Nadar and Gustave Le Gray – had lived and worked their whole lives in a world where no such profession existed. Hill and Le Gray were trained as painters, as were many of their contemporaries. Nadar worked, amongst other things, as a caricaturist. Daguerre made panoramas for the Parisian theatre. There was no readymade consensus as to the proper subjects of photography, what kind of visual effects a photographer should strive for, or how a photograph ought to be composed, lit and shot. Each practitioner had to figure all of this out on the hoof, using the skills and experience furnished by their previous vocation and whatever could be scavenged from existing pictorial traditions.

Unlike many of his more storied peers, Cornelius had no background in the visual arts. He was, after his father, a lamp manufacturer by trade, whose interest in chemistry and skill at crafting sliver plates led him to dageurreotypy as a diversification of his existing interests.[[191]](#footnote-191) It might be uncharitably suggested that these origins account for the lack of compositional finesse and tonal subtlety in his pictures, but in a sense they make him a more indicative figure than an erstwhile artist like Daguerre or Hill. Amateurism is part of the essence of early photography – not only in that each practitioner was learning to operate a new technology, or that there existed no standards according to which the “professional” photographer could be distinguished, but more fundamentally because the technology itself was in the process of subverting the distinction between dilettante and artist. The point at which the photographic apparatus would be simplified to the point where anyone, in principle, could operate it was yet to come, but the earliest cameras established the possibility of this development by alienating the artist from the material processes out of which her work was produced. A good painter is the master of her tools, which she manipulates at the scale of hand and eye; the photographer, however, must accommodate herself to the specifications of an apparatus whose workings are beyond the threshold of perception. The creative decisions which may or may not inform a particular photograph are mediated by the photographer’s engagement with the mechanism, which might be more or less adept but nonetheless constitutes a set of actions fed into a black box and enacted at a fundamental remove from their point of origin. This aleatory element is, of course, at the heart of what Susan Sontag identifies as photography’s “native surrealism”, its capacity to disclose a reality that is structurally orthogonal to consciousness and memory.[[192]](#footnote-192) From the perspective of the artist, however, it introduces a gulf between work and maker which can never be spanned.

Cornelius, then, found himself in a position defined by technical and conceptual uncertainty. The question of what it meant to be a “photographer”, of how his identity related to the nature of the images he produced, the connection between his treatment of the apparatus and the properties of the photograph – all of this is visibly at stake in the texture of the image, in its evident hesitations, technical flubs and compositional gaucherie. Is this an artwork, or a commodity? A document, or a memento? The generic configurations that photography would later harden into through the process of industrial and commercial standardisation are, in this picture, forking paths down which the form has not yet travelled. What renders this photograph so potent as the dramatization of an encounter is that this formal-technical liminality is reflected by the existential situation transpiring on the other side of the picture plane.

Just as Cornelius was clearly not entirely sure what he was doing as a photographer, so, it seems, were the seated couple similarly perplexed by what it meant to have one’s photograph taken. Recall that these people were born into a world without photography, and for most of their lives probably had little notion of its possibility. Were it not for the bizarre equipment arrayed across from them, their faces would, in all likelihood, have slid unremembered into oblivion. Instead, here they are, gazing back at us out of a pair of lives whose details are lost to us entirely, all except for the leathery hue of the man’s skin, the irregular folds of the woman’s dress, the way her white bonnet fades into the light-saturated patch above her head. Did they understand that this trivia would be what survived of them, after the histories of their persons and their doings and even the record of their names had been forgotten?

By compelling questions of this kind, *Seated Couple* encourages the viewer into a place of imaginative sympathy with that first generation for whom “the phenomenon of photography” was still “a great and mysterious experience.” Benjamin quotes the German photographer Karl Dauthendey, who reflected that “[we] didn’t trust ourselves at first, to look long at the first pictures…We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images.”[[193]](#footnote-193) This hesitancy is palpable in the awkwardness of the composition, in the anxious rigidity of the subjects, and most of all in their clamp-jawed, boggle-eyed faces, so strange and laughable to us, who reflexively put on whole repertoires of mugs and gurns at the camera’s command. It’s the faces that feel most out of place in this image and others like it, the faces that stress most vividly the gulf between the contemporary experience of photography, so overdetermined by cultural codes, and that of the past, when the encounter between the person and the apparatus was a radical personal, social and technological experiment.

*Seated Couple* depicts the first awkward efforts of the human body to accommodate itself to the parameters of the primitive photographic machine. This was, to all appearances, a discomfiting process. To be a proper photographic subject required a self-imposed mortification of all the quick spasms and brief tics that comprise a body’s resting state. As we have already established, the long exposure time required that the subject remain as still as possible to avoid blurring the image. This necessitated most especially the organisation of the face into a stable form that could be sustained throughout the length of the exposure – hence the staring eyes, the set lips, the firmly knitted brows. All of its expressive or reflexive mobility had to be suppressed, leaving only the hard, enduring shapes to make an impression on the photographic medium. In this sense, in order to appear to the camera, it was necessary to first turn oneself into a photograph. The fascination of *Seated Couple* is that it makes this adjustment tangible; we can feel in the constipated countenances of its subjects the strain of putting on a face, of striving towards a zero-degree of expression.

The dumb negativity that characterises the faces of the seated couple is indicative of the unique techno-historical situation with which they were confronted. Their generation were the first to be exposed to what Barthes described as the “profound madness of Photography,” “the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.”[[194]](#footnote-194) This dissociation is expressed within *Seated Couple* as a fracturing of the body’s temporality. In the act of making the photograph, the couple were forced to orient themselves simultaneously towards two different concepts of time. On the one hand, they had to address the present moment in all its specificity – the strange, artificial environment in which they found themselves, the artist-technician standing across from them fiddling with his bizarre apparatus, and most of all the struggle to produce their own faces as static, clearly delineated objects, over and against the itches, twitches, smirks and yawns that would otherwise deform its structure. On the other, they had to somehow attempt to conceive of the moment towards which all this effort was directed – the eternally frozen instant of the photograph, and the abstract future to which it would disclose itself. It is out of the irresolvable tension between these divergent temporalities that their faces emerge to us today, clouded, cold and portentous, like sheet-ice on a lake.

**Abstract time/Concrete duration**

These two temporalities correspond to a distinction drawn by Deleuze in his writing on cinema between “abstract time” and “concrete duration.” Abstract time presents temporality as if it were composed of discrete units called “immobile sections”, strung one after the other like beads on a thread. The dimensions of the section (whether it is a second, a nanosecond, or so on) are immaterial, so long as the measurements are standardized. Time then becomes something that can be ordered and regularized. Navigating this sequence is a simple as flipping through a stack of photographs. In fact, perhaps the clearest way to grasp “abstract time” is to think of it as a series of photographs stretching from the present back into the past. If only there were a photograph for each instant that has been lived, then there would exist a complete record of the time that has elapsed up to the present moment.

Deleuze saw “abstract” time as a fake, or at least artificial, form of temporality, “copied from space.” He opposed it to what he called “concrete duration”. This is a temporality which is fluid, labile, comes in fits and starts, expands or contracts according to the qualities of that to which it relates. It constantly overlaps itself, in the way that a present experience is always animated by past recollections and future expectations. In “abstract time”, meaning is imposed from without as that which establishes the relation between each “immobile section” – the idea of chronology, for instance, or cause and effect. In “concrete duration”, time itself is shaped by meaning – it slows or accelerates in sync with the tempo of experience.[[195]](#footnote-195) The emblem of this model of temporality is what Deleuze calls the “time-image”, which is his attempt to think the “coexistence of distinct durations, or of levels of duration,” and how “the sheets of the past coexist in a non-chronological order,” which is to say, the manner in which past, present and future can bleed into each other in ways that the model of “abstract time” ought not to allow.[[196]](#footnote-196)

The time-image is a way of trying to grasp the manner in which each of life’s lived moments is affected by life as a whole. The word “whole” here must be understood in the very specific sense laid out by Deleuze: “The whole is neither given nor giveable…if the whole is not giveable, it is because it is the Open, and because its nature is to change constantly, or to give rise to something new, in short, to endure.”[[197]](#footnote-197) This is to say that the significance of a concrete duration is subject to a context that can never be fully accounted for. Memory and desire bear on it in such a way as to infect it with indeterminacy. Compare this state with the photograph, which, to borrow a phrase of Siegfried Kracauer, captures “the spatial configuration of a moment,” and presents it to the viewer as a totality independent of the whole of which it was once part.[[198]](#footnote-198) The photograph, in this sense, is a direct visualisation of abstract time. Its power as the document of a situation is directly dependent upon the fact that it is excised from the broader temporal context that might complicate its evidentiary force. Photography allows us to get a grip on the past, but only by reifying it as a deracinated set of spatial co-ordinates.

In his 1927 essay “Photography”, Kracauer defines photography in contrast to memory in a manner that anticipates Deleuze’s analysis of abstract time and duration. Memory, in Kracauer’s account, is inherently durational, insofar as it is structured according to what its contents mean to a particular subject within the whole context of their existence. Details are recalled, forgotten, exaggerated or repressed on the basis of their significance to the individual, regardless of whether their importance is clear to them or not: “Whatever scenes a person happens to remember, they mean something that relates to the person without them necessarily having to know what they mean.”[[199]](#footnote-199) It is precisely because memories are meaningful that they are incomplete, faulty, out of proportion, “full of gaps” – they reflect (as well as shape), consciously and unconsciously, the needs and priorities of the person who remembers. This, of course, is the wager of psychoanalysis. Photography, on the other hand, will always be radically opposed to memory because it records what it records not according to some “meaningful design”, but in conformity with the technological structure of the camera.[[200]](#footnote-200) The function of a camera, Kracauer argued, is to document the totality of the spatial relations between a set of objects as they exist at a given instant. A photograph comprehends the past purely in terms of this spatial data, extracted from whatever whole to which it may once have belonged and installed in the metric scale of abstract time.

With regard to the representation of the subject, this has some important implications. It is the signature capacity of photography to wrest a single image out of the whole context of a person’s life, and to present it outside of the milieu that had once shaped its meaning:

[The photograph] so radically isolates [a] momentary pose that the function of this within the total structure of [an individual’s] personality remains anybody’s guess. The pose relates to a context which itself is not given. The photograph thus differs from the work of art in transmitting material without defining it.[[201]](#footnote-201)

For Kracauer, this amounts to a process of dehumanisation. What the photograph can record, ultimately, is precisely everything that is not essential to the subject, in the sense of being so bound up in the “total structure” or “whole” of the subject’s personality so as to be meaningless outside of it. It reduces the subject, in other words, to a cluster of cosmetic trivia with no essential bearing upon the personality to which they refer, whose true medium is the durational realm of memory. As Kracauer put it:

The viewer of old photographs feels a shiver. For they make present not knowledge of the original sitter but the spatial configuration of a moment; it is not the human being that emerges from the photographic but rather the sum of everything that can be subtracted from that being. The photograph destroys the human being by picturing it, and were the being and photograph to become one, the being would not exist.[[202]](#footnote-202)

**The Face of my Grandmother**

Kracauer illustrates this point in his essay “The Photographic Approach” with a lengthy citation from Proust’s *The Guermantes Way*. In this passage, the narrator walks in on his grandmother unannounced as she sits reading, and in his sudden apprehension of her is struck by how old she seems. The shock created by coming upon her unawares throws him into a momentary state of alienation, in which he glimpses her ageing form outside of the broader context of his memories and feelings for her. Of this experience, the narrator reflects that “[the] process that mechanically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph.” This brief instant of photographic perception prompts the following reverie:

We never see the people who are dear to us save in the animated system, the perpetual motion of our incessant love for them, which before allowing the images that their faces present to reach us catches them in its vortex, flings them back upon the idea that we have always had of them, makes them adhere to it, coincide with it. How, since into the forehead, the cheeks of my grandmother I had been accustomed to read all the most delicate, the most permanent qualities of her mind; how, since every casual glance is an act of necromancy, each face that we love a mirror of the past, how could I have failed to overlook what in her had become dulled and changed…[[203]](#footnote-203)

Here, Proust’s narrator describes a clash between two conflicting accounts of the relation between face and subject. On the one hand, he describes a version of the face that is emphatically durational, in which his visual perception of his grandmother is constantly weighed on by the whole history of their relationship up to that moment. Her face, in this context, is not simply “what it is”, but rather a centre around which all of his memories of and feelings towards his grandmother gather and revolve, forming an aura (more of this word later) which continually informs his experience of its every detail. On the other, we have the face as he experiences it in his moment of “photographic” insight – as a raw physical object, suddenly stripped of its history and its private significance, its worn and haggard form betokening only decrepitude and mortality. He looks upon her as if he were a “stranger who does not belong to the house, [a] photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again,” and in this state of alienation the face presents only a set of seemingly objective, even biological data, relating to the age, health and emotional condition of the “heavy and common, sick, lost in thought…hardly sane…dejected old woman” to which it is attached.[[204]](#footnote-204) This latter experience of the face is “photographic” in the sense that it, like a photograph, is grounded in abstract temporality, a time composed of a series of cellular moments, each of which can be isolated and analysed independently of the sequence as a whole.

The durational face, then, transmits a set of meanings which are intimate, personal and relative to the specific relationship between the observer and the observed, whereas the photographic face forms the basis of a putatively objective set of judgements about the psycho-physiological state of the other person. They differ not just in the kinds of significance they embody, but also in how this significance is generated. The durational face produces its meanings diachronically, out of the series of its expressive motions over time, and differentially, out of the distinctions and commonalities between its past and present forms. Its effects, therefore, are characterised by their elasticity and mobility; they refer the observer beyond whatever form the face assumes at any given or giveable moment by evoking the “animated system, the perpetual motion of our incessant love for them,” a persistent openness to an ever-changing context that conforms perfectly to Deleuze’s notion of the “whole.” The purportedly universal units of signification which the face bodies forth (such as a smile=happiness) are subordinate to the private, localised meanings generated for and between the subjects who elicit them, within the “animated system” of their relationship. They imply, in this sense, a form of deixis. The capacity of the observer to enter into this durational relationship with the face locates them in a position of spatial and existential proximity to the other person. It is, as Levinas puts it, a face that “tolerates only a personal response”, a form of interpellation that is the precise opposite of that famously described by Althusser, in that it calls the subject not into an abstract relation to institutional power, but into a concrete relation grounded in the specificities of memory and shared experience.[[205]](#footnote-205) The durational face therefore projects a kind of membrane or shell around itself, a space-time of intimate intersubjectivity within which the observer and observed must coincide, if the face is to be meaningful as such. Outside of this space, the durational aspects of the face can only signify as a kind of negativity pointing to the lack of a shared history between the subjects.

The photographic face, on the other hand, is extracted from this zone of intimacy and reterritorialized within the spatial continuum of abstract time. Its significance is produced synchronically, as the sum of the relations between its discrete parts at a given moment. For this reason, it appears to produce its meaning self-sufficiently, without context. It operates according to a logic of identity and sameness, the stability of its form defining the enduring, transcendent nature of the qualities it represents. The subject embodied by this face possesses a set of determinate properties as expressed by these spatial forms, and existing independently of its environment or its relations with other subjects. This not to say that the subject of such a face does not change over time, but these changes are experienced as a passage through a set of discrete, singular states, as in a strip of film removed from the projector, rather than part of the organic growth of an emergent “whole.”

This model of the face is defined almost entirely in terms of its “iterability”, in the Derridean sense – “its readability…despite the absolute disappearance of any receiver, determined in general…in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers.”[[206]](#footnote-206) As with a written sign, it is characterised by its ability to sustain its legibility in any conceivable context, at the price of its total alienation from the signified that it claims to express. Rather than functioning as part of a complex web of concrete interpersonal relations, the face is supposed to refer simply to the existence of an absent subject, or to identify one of its discrete characteristics or internal states. The face therefore becomes a mechanism which works to isolate and objectify certain qualities of the subject, the precise nature of these qualities typically being defined by the context in which the image is to be put to use – a subject which we shall shortly return to.

In the quoted passage from Proust, the narrator is shocked out of his mnemonically and affectively informed perspective on his grandmother by the sudden, “photographic” glimpse of her aged and worn face. We ought not to assume, however, that the discovery of his grandmother’s face as it appears to him in this moment of alienation *disproves* his previous view of her. It is not that his memories and affections are suddenly revealed to be baseless, sentimental delusions totally detached from the purportedly empirical reality of her ageing form. Indeed, we might rather argue that the disturbing effect of the episode is directly proportionate to the profundity of his pre-existing conception of his grandmother’s face and its deep embeddedness in the texture of their shared history. What Proust is proposing here is an integrated system of face-perception, wherein an affectively and mnemonically informed model of the face of another is periodically revised by sudden shocks of “photographic” alienation, which confront us with the objective realities of entropy and decay.

There is, in fact, an illuminating correspondence between the experience Proust describes and the contemporary neuropsychological understanding of the process of facial recognition. In a highly influential 1986 paper, psychologists Bruce and Young proposed that “a familiar face is represented via an interlinked set of expression-independent structural codes for distinct head angles, with some codes reflecting the global configuration at each angle and others representing particular distinctive features.”[[207]](#footnote-207) In other words, a cognitive representation of a known face consists of a succession of empirically specific perspectives on that face (seen from different angles, at different times, under different lighting conditions, with emphasis placed on different features) organised to form a synthetic whole which is distinct from the face as it appears at any given or giveable moment, yet nonetheless attempts to hold each of these moments within its overall structure. The ideal nature of this set of “structural codes” does not in any sense render it unreal – on the contrary, the intelligibility of the familiar face as an empirical phenomenon depends upon the pre-existence of this generalised representation. By the same token, the utility of this facial gestalt depends upon the possibility of its being dynamically updated by emergent sensory data, in order to encompass changes in the face’s material structure, or visual differences created by environmental effects. This necessary gap between the ideal mental representation and empirical phenomenon of the face therefore leaves room for the kind of shocking experience described in the passage from Proust, wherein a momentary perspective on a known face varies so substantially from a subject’s cognitive model of it that the former cannot be integrated into the latter, but instead forces the latter to undergo a fundamental restructuring in order to deal with this new information. This is evidently a traumatic adjustment for Proust’s narrator, but it also has ethical significance, mitigating his narcissistic identification of his grandmother with his memories of her: “I, for whom my grandmother was still myself, I who had never seen her save in my own soul, always at the same place in the past, through the transparent sheets of contiguous, overlapping memories.” Through the force of this collision between opposing temporalities, the grandmother is torn loose from the bindings of the narrator’s memory and restored to the status of an independent subject.

It is in this sense the opposition between these two modes of witnessing the face that opens the possibility of a genuine intersubjective relation, imbued with the full richness of memory and affect but also open to what Levinas calls “the exteriority of the other,” meaning the perpetual capacity of the other person to transcend the idea that I have of them: “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum* – the adequate idea.”[[208]](#footnote-208) The awareness that the content of another’s being must always exceed what it is possible for the I to understand or imagine is, for Levinas, the fundamental ground of the ethical relationship, which he describes, not in terms of adherence to a prescribed set of rules for behaviour, but as a constantly reaffirmed openness to the potentially limitless demands that the other, in its structural unknowability, may place upon the subject. In the above passage from Proust, this relational structure is mediated through the opposition between the grandmother’s two faces, one which is perpetually enshrouded by the memories and emotions of the narrator, and one which momentarily transgresses this affectively and mnemonically informed space from without, appearing to him as if he were a stranger with no connections to this old woman whatsoever. The shock produced by their juxtaposition constitutes an essential reminder that the other exists simultaneously in multiple temporalities, some of which are shared with the subject, and some of which must remain exterior to it – an understanding which, Levinas tells us, is the essential condition of ethical relationality.

For Proust, photography serves as a metaphor to illustrate the alienated, empirical side of the dialectic of face recognition. Kracauer, on the other hand, understands that as a visual technology, photography does not merely mimic an innate perceptual mechanism – it objectifies, automates and extends it. As Daniel Black explains, “the camera itself is a technology employed to fix and stabilize the face, capturing it within a set of temporal and spatial coordinates alien to its lived physicality. It therefore introduces another level of processing between the living face and human perception, as a result sometimes breaking the connection between the mental conceptualization and the material phenomenon to which it should refer.”[[209]](#footnote-209) Photography detaches the empirical component of the face from the integrated psychological structure of which it was once a part, enabling its product to exist independently as a phenomenal object. Freed from the constraints of the “animated system”, the face is released into a new space of photographic legibility. It can be copied and put into circulation, viewed across many different spaces and times and received in many different contexts, serialised, ordered, analysed, combined with other kinds of signs, and installed in systems designed to organise identity, meaning and value. Through the medium of photography, the face is liberated to participate in a new kind of visual culture and to serve a range of new instrumental uses. Writing in 1927, Kracauer viewed the development of these phenomena with suspicion and anxiety. “The world,” he wrote in an article for *Frankfurter Zeitung*, “has given itself a “photograph-able face”; it can be photographed because it strives to dissolve itself within the spatial continuum that yields to snapshots.”[[210]](#footnote-210) His insight – a foundational one for the practice of photographic criticism – is that photography does not merely represent the world, or even simply disseminate a photographic way of seeing. Photography, Kracauer believed, actively shapes the reality that it represents, organising it in such a way as to render it already conformable to the specifications of the apparatus. “[The] flood of photos,” he wrote, “sweeps away memory’s dams…The spatial continuum from the camera perspective overtakes the spatial appearance of the cognised subject, and the likeness with the latter blurs the contours of the subject’s “history”.[[211]](#footnote-211) The entry of the face into this “visual space of photography” is for Kracauer a moment of the direst significance, threatening to divorce the historical subject from its visible image, replacing it with a creature whose characteristics can be surmised from a simple accounting of its transparent and objective facial features.

From this perspective, the “incomparable fascination” of an image like *Seated Couple* is that it represents to us, today, a critical crossroads in the history of the relation between photography and the face, a point where “the not yet thoroughly depersonalised technology of that period of transition” created a “spatial environment in which traces of meaning were capable of holding on.”[[212]](#footnote-212) The picture preserves a moment when photographic technology had not yet become unified or hegemonic; a degree of confusion as to what would constitute the “visual space of photography,” and what would be excluded from it, is still very much at play. The exaggerated rigidity of the couple’s faces is itself evidence of the struggle that the picture dramatizes, their stony countenances performing for us the ordeal of fixing themselves into a form that the apparatus could recognise, freezing their bodies’ mortal tremors and casting them forward into the abstract future. As Benjamin put it:

The procedure itself caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it; during the considerable period of the exposure, the subject (as it were) grew into the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in a snapshot…Everything about these early pictures was built to last.[[213]](#footnote-213)

To say that these images were “built to last” is to recognise that they bear within them the trace of a temporal mode that the camera would soon begin to erase. At the heart of the picture’s static surface a shard of duration persists, lodged in the shadowed folds of the couple’s brows and the dark of their pupils, a vestige of what the photograph represses and an echo of everything it cannot contain. The inexorable drive to convert the visible to a sequence of spatial arrangements distributed along a discrete series of abstract moments is frustrated by this stubborn remainder of those aspects of the subject which photography systematically occludes. This reference to the durational can only be negative. A photograph cannot show growth, movement or diachrony. But what Benjamin described as the “silence” of these faces testifies to the fact that part of their significance remains visibly unstructured by the spatializing regime of photography, lingering in the picture as a reticence which points to what is excluded from the photograph without ever being able to specify its contents. To the extent that they insist on foregrounding that part of themselves that cannot be accommodated to the topographic language of photography, these faces remain, as Benjamin says, “without inscription.” This refusal to entirely become photographic renders the face a mysterious source of depth within the otherwise absolutely two-dimensional picture plane. Elsewhere, the eye is free to wander throughout the image, distractedly capturing the scraps of visual trivia that are scattered across its flattened space, but it knocks against these faces like knuckles on an iron door. They respond with a sounding echo, indicating that whatever lies behind is hollow, dark, and of uncertain dimensions.

**Photographic Discipline**

There is one further theoretical register in which we could consider the phenomenon of *Seated Couple*. The palpably effortful nature of the couple’s bodily adjustment implies a silent struggle to accommodate themselves to the experience of a new corporeality, imposed on them by the camera. Photography does not merely capture these bodies; it reaches deep into their physical structure, reorganising them according to the imperatives of the apparatus:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born; it defined how one many have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines.

This, of course, is Foucault on the “disciplines of the body” which developed throughout the eighteenth century, as a juridical order which had previously been organised around the spectacle of sovereign power transformed itself into a regime of institutions through which human subjects were produced as “subject and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies.”[[214]](#footnote-214) *Seated Couple* provides a demonstration of how photography constituted a particularly intimate species of disciplinary power, a kind of training exercised upon the face and body, preparing it to do new work and receive new meanings.

Foucault’s classic instances of disciplinary power are institutional – the school, the factory and of course, the prison – but the application of his theory to the case of photography is obvious. The disciplinary institution works by demarcating a particular space and organizing it according to a “cellular” structure. The utility of the cell-form is that it “allows both the characterization of the individual as individual and the ordering of a given multiplicity.”[[215]](#footnote-215) Think, for example, of a factory – the total productive labour is divided into a series of discrete tasks to be performed repeatedly by individual workers, whose output can be observed and managed in isolation. The worker’s behaviour can be monitored, each action isolated and analysed, corrections can be made to promote increased efficiency. At the same time, the worker can be assessed as part of a larger ensemble, in relation to all the other workers operating under identical conditions as well as in terms of the productive process as a whole. Discipline, then, is an organisation of bodies within space which allows for the identification and direction of the individual according to the goals of a broader system, whatever they might be. As Foucault puts it:

In organizing `cells', `places' and `ranks', the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical. It is spaces that provide fixed positions and permit circulation; they carve out individual segments and establish operational links; they mark places and indicate values; they guarantee the obedience of individuals, but also a better economy of time and gesture. They are mixed spaces: real because they govern the disposition of buildings, rooms, furniture, but also ideal, because they are projected over this arrangement of characterizations, assessments, hierarchies.[[216]](#footnote-216)

According to Foucault’s narrative, “disciplinary tactics” gestated throughout the early modern period in seminaries, workshops, military academies and almshouses before coming to maturity in the institutions of nineteenth-century industrial society – schools, prisons, factories, hospitals. In this context, they enabled the management of growing urban populations, and particularly the regulation of one of industrial capitalism’s primary contradictions, between the imperative to maximise the efficiency of every worker and the production process as a whole, and the increasing individual and collective power of workers to advocate for themselves as a subject of rights. The simultaneous capacity to recognize an individual and to locate them as an element within a broader ensemble was vital in transforming an undifferentiated urban mass into a manageable order of political and economic subjects.

Photography was complementary to this project in several ways. First of all, it is an inherently “cellular” form. Each photograph is a discrete, self-contained unit that isolates the sum of the spatial relations that exist between a set of objects at a given instant. It is, in this sense, individuating and analytic. However, photographs also lend themselves perfectly to juxtaposition, sorting and sequencing. Photographs can be put together to tell a story, to map a space, or to represent a population. To this extent, they are classificatory and synthetic. Photography mediates between the singular and the aggregate – one of the signature functions of the disciplinary apparatus.

Photography can also produce subjects through a disciplinary process, as exemplified by *Seated Couple*. There are two aspects to this. On the side of the apparatus are techniques such as framing, lighting and tone, which can present a subject as more or less individuated, recognisable and so on. On the side of the sitter are the various disciplinary imperatives we have already mentioned, such as the injunction to pose, to remain still and retain the correct expression. Without this cooperation, the image’s subjectifying power is thrown into doubt, especially in the age of the long exposure, when the disobedient sitter had the power to wreck the whole procedure. The hinge between these two disciplinary practices is the face – this is the point where the subjectifying powers of the apparatus and the physical orientation of the sitter coincide. On the one hand, the camera has to seek out the face, to centre it within the frame and to treat it so as to achieve the desired subjectifying effect. On the other, the face must turn itself towards the camera, adopting to some degree a posture of consent, whether and however this consent was actually secured. This obscure confluence of wills, blending inclination and coercion, impression and expression – all is contained in the problem of the face’s orientation, the conditions of its appearance for the camera. All photo-portraits base themselves in this micro-physical power struggle between apparatus and body, and it is out of this dialectic that the face emerges as the vexed site of subjectivity.

In institutions like prisons, factories, hospitals and schools, the subject is produced as the result of a set of material practices that take place within a specially demarcated space. Disciplinary power is restricted to these special environments, and the disciplinary subject is defined by a set of behaviours and characteristics which, ultimately, can be traced back to them. Photography is different. The photographic subject is abstracted from the disciplinary process that created it. The production of a photographic face requires, as we have seen, a negotiation between the body and the apparatus, a series of calibrations, adjustments and compromises which take place over time, and this time is precisely what is excluded from the photograph. In its frozen objectivity, photography suppresses the technological and bodily relations out of which its subject arises. In place of this disciplinary power dynamic, we receive the static spatial arrangement of the finished photo-portrait, wherein the traces of the struggle that shaped it are only partially visible, and can only be theoretically reconstructed after the fact.

It is this act of sublimation which lends the photo-portrait its apparent transparency, its claim to simply reveal what was already there “in the world.” Compared to the subject produced by the disciplinary institutions, the photographic subject may be static and inert, but it makes up for this with its greater substantiality. Since it appears to exist independently of the process that created it, it retains its integrity in a variety of different contexts. The disciplinary institutions represent a closed system, bound to their particular rules and modes of spatial organisation. Photographic discipline is an open system, capable of reproducing itself in all manner of different environments. It is characteristic of the photographic face, therefore, to enter into various kinds of significant relations and to synch up with different systems of power.

As a mode of subjectification, photography is able to travel beyond the bounds of disciplinary space and into society at large. It can contribute to a general disciplinary economy by mediating between different institutions; it can also enter into spaces not typically associated with the disciplines, such as the private or domestic sphere. In this sense, photography provides the technological basis for what Allan Sekula calls a “generalized, inclusive *archive*, a *shadow archive* that encompasses an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that terrain.”[[217]](#footnote-217) This “shadow archive” is of course an ideal projection, irreal and therefore unrealizable. Nonetheless, it provided and continues to provide the conceptual basis for a very real consolidation of disciplinary practices and archival materials; it was the logic of such a shadow archive, a photographic directory in which every subject is registered, which motivated Alphonse Bertillon’s attempts to create a biometric database of French criminals in the late nineteenth century, just as it underlies the current efforts of US intelligence to synchronise the contents of the various caches of facial identification data to which it has access.

What, then, are some of the features of the photographic face, and how do they inflect the kind of subject that emerges from it? The photograph presents the face as an object with its own characteristics, independent of the temporal context that might have shaped them. It is monumentally still, and from this stillness derives its legibility. In the photograph, the geometric properties of the face acquire numinous significance. Line, contour, shape, relief – each of these factors can be interpreted as the sign of the subject they ostensibly manifest. The subject only appears in the picture by virtue of the disciplinary process sketched above, but since the photograph obscures this process, the viewer is entitled to fall back upon these characterological semiotics, as if the person emanated directly from the face without mediation. Subjectivity, therefore, can be presented not as a contingent, relational phenomenon but rather an objective, even a biological, state of affairs. This capacity of the photograph to apprehend the subject by fixing the face was fundamental to its significance throughout the late nineteenth-century and beyond. In the tense, awkward composition of *Seated Couple* we witness the human face being prepared for its participation in a whole range of new economies of social capital, population management and scientific enquiry.

**Here and Now**

Benjamin was fascinated by the creations of photography’s first few decades – the works of Hill and Adamson, Karl Dauthendey, Hippolyte Bayard, not to mention the stacks of now-anonymous incunabula that survived to posterity. Of an 1857 image depicting Dauthendey and his fiancée on the occasion of their engagement he wrote:

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has, so to speak, seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy [*Sosein*] of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.[[218]](#footnote-218)

The early photo-portraits exerted a compulsive power over Benjamin, driving him to search within them for the flickering remnants of a concrete duration, lodged paradoxically in the texture of their abstract spatiality. He had a word for this *ignis fatuus* that so fixated him: “aura”. His most widely circulated and contested concept, aura is Benjamin’s attempt to describe the mesmeric quality of these images, their *Sosein* (which is translated above as “immediacy” but can also be understood as “suchness”). As its connotations would suggest, the term denotes a sort of atmosphere that surrounds a particular person, object or scene – as Benjamin put it, “the associations which…tend to cluster around the object of a perception.”[[219]](#footnote-219) It is the sense of a memory accrued to a material thing, a testament to its unique history, the mark of its singularity and authenticity. Above all it defines the capacity of an object to assert a sense of presence, of its own discrete “here and now”, into which the viewer must pass if they are to experience the fullness of its meanings. In short, the auratic object expresses itself as the centre of a concrete duration, relative to which the viewer must situate themselves.

The faces that looked back at Benjamin from the early photo-portraits did not do so out of the sterile flatland of an “immobile section”, but from a live moment with all the febrile tension of a here and now, marked by the volatile crossing of distinct temporalities. “There was an aura about them, a medium that lent fulness and security to their gaze even as it penetrated that medium.”[[220]](#footnote-220) They look back. In so doing, they effect a disturbing inversion. Faced by the stare of such images, the viewer may understand herself as occupying a futurity relative to the present of the people depicted, as if she were no more than a potentiality of that moment, the sitter’s idle daydream. Under these circumstances it is the viewer who begins to feel ghostlike under the disconcertingly solid gaze of these departed souls. Nevertheless, what ultimately drew Benjamin to these images was their valedictory quality, the sense that however deep an impression they leave, they present a phenomenon that was at that very moment in the process of departing the world. “For the last time, the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty.”[[221]](#footnote-221) Indeed, these images were a bellwether. Wherever we find the aura in Benjamin’s writing, it is in the process of disintegration, atrophy or disappearance, if it is not being counterfeited for nefarious purposes. How do we account for this sense of decay, and why should the face be its particular locus?

In part, this is a technological question. In those first few decades of experimentation and discovery, the constitution of the photographic apparatus was extremely fluid, and innovations were frequent and often drastic. More powerful lenses and improvements in the sensitivity of the photographic medium soon slashed the prolonged exposure times that were so fundamental to the composition and effect of the early photo-portraits. As Gisèle Freund recounts, “[by] 1841, exposure was reduced to two or three minutes; by 1842 to only twenty to forty seconds. Finally, a year or two later, the length of sitting was no longer a problem in achieving a photographic portrait.”[[222]](#footnote-222) It is important to note here that Freund is referring in each case to the fastest available devices, which would have taken some time to diffuse themselves throughout the marketplace. Nonetheless, an exposure time of two or three seconds obviated the compositional difficulties and physical discomfort that had so plagued the creators and sitters of the early photo-portraits. The bodily adjustments required of the photographic subject were compressed into an ever-shortening interval, such that posing for a photograph became less an ordeal of endurance and more a matter of well-conditioned reflexes. As photography progressed towards the snapshot, the duration required for the photograph’s creation and the abstract time represented in the image were harmonised to the point where the disjunction between them was scarcely perceptible, both for those who sat for the picture, and those who would later look into it. The tension between these contrasting temporalities, so startlingly staged in the faces of the seated couple, began to fade from the photographic image.

The contraction of exposure times was only a single element of a broader trend towards the commercial standardisation of photographic technology and practice. The early photographers – Daguerre, Talbot, Hill and Adamson, Cornelius – were equal parts artisan and alchemist, each working with their own bespoke apparatus. Consequently, the images they produced display a remarkable tonal variety, from the metallic clarity of the daguerreotype through Hill and Adamson’s hazy chiaroscuro, to the abyssal darkness of Hippolyte Bayard’s *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man* (1840) – as Benjamin put it, “the absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow.”[[223]](#footnote-223) Over the succeeding decades, this miscellany gave way to an increasingly streamlined mechanism, as the differences between these diverse instruments and techniques were subsumed by more efficient designs. At the same time, that first generation of eccentric specialists were replaced by a cohort of opportunistic entrepreneurs, figures like Félix Nadar and André-Adolphe-Eugène Disderi, who combined technical facility with an understanding of the burgeoning photographic marketplace. These independent tradespeople worked out of privately-owned studios and produced pictures on commission. By the end of the century, however, the profitability of such enterprises had been undercut by the concentration of liquid capital and industrial machinery in the hands of large-scale organisations such as department stores and manufacturers like Eastman Kodak or AGFA. In 1888, Eastman Kodak released its first portable camera for the mass market, a leather-bound wooden box that measured ninety-five by eighty-three by one-hundred and sixty-five millimetres, and shot onto roll film.[[224]](#footnote-224) Each roll held a hundred exposures; when these were finished, the film could be posted to the Kodak factory for development. The offer of cheap, easy-to use cameras integrated with professional development services facilitated a boom in amateur photography, permanently restricting the scale of the professional trade.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, then, the photography business had grown into a paradigm of industrial modernity – centralised production, standardised merchandise and broad networks of distribution. Both cameras and photographs were far more widespread, and far more homogeneous artefacts than they had been at their inception. Meanwhile, taking a photograph had become, relative to the clumsy palaver of 1840, a facile task, the product of which was superior in clarity and definition. Benjamin, for his part, did not see these developments as an unmixed positive. “[Advances] in optics,” he groused, “made instruments available that wholly overcame darkness and recorded appearances as faithfully as any mirror. After 1880…photographers made it their business to simulate the aura which had been banished from the picture with the suppression of darkness through faster lenses…They saw it as their task to simulate this aura using all the arts of retouching, and especially the so-called gum print.”[[225]](#footnote-225) The range of graphical effects (what Benjamin described as the “absolute continuum from brightest light to darkest shadow”) which had characterised early photography *as a direct function of its technological heterogeneity* were smoothed out by the streamlined efficiency of the modern apparatus. In response, the compositional and textural idiosyncrasies which lent early portraiture so much of its inimitable mystery were herded into the ghetto of self-conscious art photography movements such as Art Nouveau and Pictorialism, which sought to demonstrate the medium’s aesthetic *bona fides* through techniques which aped the formal qualities of painting, such as “retouching” the negative and the maligned “gum print.”

As is probably already clear, Benjamin gave these movements short shrift. Rather than distinguishing their works from the mercenary functionality of commercial photography, Benjamin argued that the aestheticism of the Photo-Secessionists and their ilk represented the complementary inverse of advertising, in that both fetishized the sensory-visual aspects of the image at the expense of all other possible functions: “The creative in photography is its capitulation to fashion. *The world is beautiful* – that is its watchword. In it is unmasked the posture of a photography that can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connections in which it exists.”[[226]](#footnote-226) Benjamin further advanced his argument with reference to the bourgeois family portraiture of the late nineteenth century – a subject of which he had bitter personal experience. With wry sorrow he recounts a childhood memory of a family photoshoot in which he was made to dress up as a “parlour Tyrolean, yodelling, waving our hat before a painted snowscape.” The image which probably inspired this recollection is reproduced in Eiland and Jennings’ *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, and is every bit as excruciating as one might hope, but Benjamin does not dwell any further on it here.[[227]](#footnote-227) Instead, he identifies himself with an 1887 picture of the not-yet-novelist Franz Kafka, “perhaps six years old, dressed up in a humiliatingly tight child’s suit overloaded with trimming, in a sort of greenhouse landscape.”[[228]](#footnote-228) Benjamin’s empathy here is both pained and touching. He continues:

The background is thick with palm fronds. And as if to make these upholstered tropics even stuffier and more oppressive, the subject holds in his left hand an inordinately large broad-brimmed hat, such as Spaniards wear. He would surely be lost in this setting were it not for his immensely sad eyes, which dominate this landscape predestined for them.[[229]](#footnote-229)

The young Kafka is cut adrift in this alien environment, a horrid pseudo-imperialist hyperreality cobbled together from the banal fantasies of his parents’ generation. There is more at stake here than bad taste. In the old photographs that Benjamin so treasures the reticence of the subjects combined with the technical qualities of the mechanism such that “their private space…the space in which they lived [was allowed] to get onto the plate with them.”[[230]](#footnote-230) Here, though, the barest hint of a unique duration is stifled by the kitsch clutter choking the image. The photograph depicts for us the smothering of the young Kafka under an unbearable weight of visual fetishes; it performs the hypostatization of the visible-as-fetish, over and against the life of the subject it ostensibly represents. The only vital signs derive from the boy’s antagonism to his airless surroundings, suggested to us, as Benjamin indicates, solely by the contrast between the profundity of his outsized eyes and the ugly trappings that engulf him. “This picture,” he wrote, “in its infinite sadness, forms a pendant to the early photographs in which people did not yet look out at the world in so excluded and godforsaken a manner as this boy.”[[231]](#footnote-231) These, as he puts it, are the conditions under which “man withdraws from the photographic image.”[[232]](#footnote-232)

**A Frenzy of the Visible**

The irony of this statement, of course, is that at no other point in human history had the human face been more widely depicted. Photography had metastasized to the very flesh of everyday life, insinuating itself deep into pre-existing processes of social reproduction. It became, in Pierre Bourdieu’s words, a tool for the “domestic manufacture of domestic emblems” – family portraits, pictures of confirmations, weddings and birthdays, records of days out or even, as the practice became more widespread, holidays, all of these a means of “solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life…[and] of reinforcing the integration of the family group by reasserting the sense it has both of itself and of its unity.”[[233]](#footnote-233) It was likewise an integral part of the experience of consumption, both as a commodity in itself and as a means of representing and publicising other products, whilst it also lay the foundation for new forms of mass entertainment. Photographically-illustrated newspapers, meanwhile, were soon to become a staple of public life, with, as Tagg recounts, the *Daily Mirror* being the first of these to illuminate its stories solely with photographic plates in 1903.[[234]](#footnote-234) Just as it became a mechanism for the circulation of information and knowledge of distant places and people, so photography also served as a means of providing a positivistic accounting of the material world and the human body for the purposes of science and industry, and a tool through which state apparatuses could manage territories and populations.

Each of these general functions, and many more besides, were sustained by what Allan Sekula has winningly dubbed the “traffic in photographs,” a phrase which evokes simultaneously the senses of constant, flowing motion, of financial transactions and the exchange of goods, and of the continuity of licit and illicit business.[[235]](#footnote-235) Photographs coursed through and between these diverse social spheres like lifeblood, not only facilitating the growth of each specific sector, but also establishing a kind of continuity amongst the lot of them. Insofar as an increasing aggregate of cultural and social reproduction was coming to depend upon the constant production and circulation of images, photography at the turn of the nineteenth century was a vital element in the emergence of a general social apparatus that, in the words of Jean-Louis Comolli, not only “manufactures representations” but also “manufactures itself from representations.”[[236]](#footnote-236)

In Comolli’s striking phrase, “[the] second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible.” This condition was not solely limited to “the social multiplication of images” in the form of “illustrated papers, waves of print, caricatures, etc.” It was, more profoundly, the effect of a general imperative to extend “the field of the visible and the representable” via all available modalities. He continues: “by journeys, explorations, colonisations, the whole world becomes visible at the same time that it becomes appropriatable (sic),” listing also the industrialised reproduction of standardised commodities and the mechanical analysis of bodily movement as further instances of how this extension of what can appear to the eye is bound up with the growing drive to exercise possession and control over objects and space on a global scale.[[237]](#footnote-237) “The mechanical,” Comolli writes, “opens out and multiplies the visible and between them is established a *complicity*…” In other words, it is not merely the case that modern mechanisms such as photography determine the range of what is visible; at the same time, the economic and industrial systems through which these technologies are distributed and put into effect demand that this range be constantly expanded, encompassing further territories, capturing new curiosities, objectifying undocumented moments, producing more signs.[[238]](#footnote-238)

What Comolli is beginning to describe here is the symbiotic development of a whole suite of social practices, political institutions and economic complexes, of “systems of the delegation of power (political representation), the ceaseless working-up of social imaginaries (historical, ideological representations) and…even…modes of relational behaviour (balances of power, confrontations, manoeuvres of seduction, strategies of defense, marking of differences or affiliations)”, all of which depend upon what Baudrillard calls “the proliferation of signs according to demand” – that is, the constant production and dissemination of images.[[239]](#footnote-239) The novelty here is not, of course, the functional importance of images within the execution of state power or the perpetuation of social reproduction, but rather the capacity of images to reproduce themselves across a “new and homogeneous terrain of consumption and circulation” that encompasses every context from the furtive, libidinal relation between an individual and a picture of their desired object to attempts to consolidate gendered, racial, class or national identities around an ostensibly representative image. Photography does not only serve to facilitate the innumerable social processes in which it is involved, but also provides a metaphor for the continuity of society in its totality, conceived as a space of absolute visibility which binds together these various institutions and practices as parts of a single machine-like assemblage.

It therefore becomes possible at this historical moment to speak of the photographic as a generalised space of symbolic equivalence, wherein, in the words of Vilém Flusser, “[e]very single experience, every single bit of knowledge, every single value can be reduced to individually known and evaluated photographs. And every single action can be analysed through the individual photos taken as models.”[[240]](#footnote-240) As Kracauer intuited, and as Susan Sontag described at greater length, to “atomise” the world in such a way is in part to make it “manageable” by converting it into a series of “thin slice[s] of space” that can then be studied, interpreted, ranked, classed and stored as a part of systems designed to organise the entitlements, circulation and productivity of subjects within a society.[[241]](#footnote-241) The establishment of this terrain of fungible homogeneity was in large part a function of photography’s instrumental relationship with industrial capital, for which it served as the basis for a kind of globalised semiotic marketplace. As Sekula puts it, “Just as money is the universal gauge of exchange value, uniting all the world goods in a single system of transactions, so photographs are imagined to reduce all sights to relations of formal equivalence.”[[242]](#footnote-242)

This generalised realm of the visible is the context for a thoroughgoing rearticulation of the face’s meaning and value. Of course, photography turns the face into a means by which groups and individuals can be related to institutions of disciplinary power – police, colonial authorities, the asylum. Many of the most famous photographic projects of the second half of the nineteenth century were conducted upon criminals, mental patients or colonial subjects – take Hugh Welch Diamond’s images of patients at the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum,[[243]](#footnote-243) *The People of India*, the vast ethnographic survey produced by British colonial officers between 1868 and 1875, containing 468 photographs of indigenous Indians from various walks of life,[[244]](#footnote-244) or Alphonse Bertillon’s anthropometric system for cataloguing repeat offenders in the Parisian criminal justice system.[[245]](#footnote-245) Each of these projects identified the face as a site through which the human subject could be known and acted upon according to the prerogatives of a particular institution.

What is just as important, however, is the face’s new ecumenical significance. Extracted from its private, localised networks of meaning, the face was released into a space of free circulation wherein its significance was characterised by what Benjamin called “exhibition value” – the capacity to circulate through different social sites, being seen and seen again, passing through the hands of many different people, picking up significations and carrying them into new contexts like pollen on an insect’s wing.[[246]](#footnote-246) As it was diffused across this homogeneous terrain of visibility, one of its most important functions was to mediate between various disciplinary sites, lending consistency to the subject upon which they operated. Accordingly, the face becomes a site of a struggle for the definition of human within the conditions of the mass society, with multiple forces striving to establish the modes of classification according to which it would be understood.

We see this most clearly in the field of eugenics and racial science, wherein the face becomes a mechanism for the segmentation of humanity into a hierarchy of races and castes. In the work of the Italian criminologist, Cesare Lombroso, “criminal man” could be reliably identified by his atavistic features. Meanwhile, Francis Galton, cousin of Darwin and coiner of the word “eugenics”, produced composite portraits, “a generalised picture [which] represents no man in particular, but portrays an imaginary figure possessing the average features of any given group of men.”[[247]](#footnote-247) He achieved this by exposing a sequence of portraits of different individuals to the same photographic plate, so that the features that the individuals tended to share would leave an impression, whilst any idiosyncrasies would tend to be erased. The result, he claimed, was a “typical picture” of the group in question, whether this meant a racial, class or even a professional category. For Galton, the features of the face contained within them the prospectus for a system of hierarchical organisation at the level of the human species, and the photographic camera was the hermeneutic machine which would disclose it.

**“The Highly Original Dr. Duchenne”**

Another figure who manifested this universalizing impulse in combination with a flair for radical photographic experimentation was the French neurologist Duchenne-du-Boulogne. Duchenne was born in 1806 in Boulogne-sur-Mer, a port town in the Pas-de-Calais department on France’s northern coast. He lived the first part of his life as a provincial doctor in his home town, before moving to Paris in 1842 and taking up the study of neurology, which was at the time the bleeding edge of medical science. The roots of this interest are somewhat obscure, although Andrew Cuthbertson suggests that Duchenne’s researches may have been inspired by a history of madness in the family.[[248]](#footnote-248) In Paris he spent his days wandering hospitals and asylums in search of interesting cases; in particular he was a regular visitor to the psychiatric facilities at La Salpêtrière, later to become the base of Jean-Martin Charcot, another pioneering neurologist and clinical photographer, as well as teacher to Sigmund Freud. “A feature of the hospital,” Cuthbertson explains, “was the number of “incurable” cases with unidentified paralysis or atrophy. It was by studying, sorting, and classifying these rejected people – the mad, the epileptic, spastic, and paralytic – using physical examination aided by electrical stimulation, that Duchenne began to catalogue neurological disorders.”[[249]](#footnote-249) In the course of these investigations he discovered a number of neurological and muscular disorders, including Pseudohypertrophic muscular dystrophy, which to this day bears his name. Indeed, it is for his contributions to medicine and neurology that Duchenne is chiefly remembered today. The legacy of the work we are about to encounter is a little more complicated.

It was from these neurological experiments that Duchenne hit upon the method which would make him famous in his own lifetime. Part of his examinations of patients at La Salpêtrière involved using an electrical charge to stimulate different muscles. Apart from enabling him to test the functionality of muscles in the arms, legs and so forth, he also discovered that he was able to reproduce characteristic facial expressions in the same manner. By placing electrodes on “the points under which the motor nerves enter the facial muscles”, he found that he could manipulate the various components of the face’s expressive mechanism in isolation and observe the effects. The procedure was non-invasive, although he admitted it could cause “a disagreeable sensation and even a little pain.” (20) Instead of using the charge from a battery (as in the more familiar technique of Galvanism), Duchenne’s investigations were powered by induction, a process which generates an electrical current by moving a magnet through a coil of wire. The position of the magnet *vis-à- vis* the coil and the speed at which it is moved determine the strength of the current, which allowed Duchenne to manually adjust the intensity of the charge as it was applied to the muscle.[[250]](#footnote-250)

This “electrophysiological” apparatus allowed Duchenne to stimulate the facial muscles both independently and in concert, and with varying degrees of force, providing an unprecedented insight into the anatomical basis of human facial expression. He was able to identify which muscles are associated with which characteristics expressions, as well as grasping the overall structure in which they were organised. His findings were published in 1862 as *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, wherein he declared: “This careful study of isolated muscle action showed me the reason behind the lines, wrinkles, and folds of the moving face. These lines and folds are precise signs, which in their various combinations result in facial expression. Thus by proceeding from the expressive muscle to the spirit that set it in action, I have been able to study and discover the mechanism and laws of human facial expression.”[[251]](#footnote-251) It is not too much to say that this work revolutionised the study of facial anatomy. Duchenne discovered previously unknown facial muscles and cleared up numerous misconceptions about the physiological basis of particular expressions. The evolutionary psychologist and high priest of the “basic emotions” approach to human facial expression Paul Ekman acknowledged in 1990 that “[Duchenne’s] identification of the particular muscles producing specific changes in facial appearance provided the groundwork for those who measure facial behaviour today.”[[252]](#footnote-252)

The question of how these discoveries related to the subject from whose face Duchenne was eliciting these expressions was, however, rather more complex. It should be stressed first of all that he was in no way a materialist. Whilst his work was strongly influenced by proto-scientific works such as Charles Bell’s *Essays on The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression* (1824) as well as his own empirical investigations, he was in other respects a genuine heir to Lavater, believing that facial expressivity constituted a divinely authored universal language installed into the hardware of the body by God himself: “The language of facial expression had to be immutable, a condition without which it could not be universal. Because of this the Creator placed facial expression under the control of instinctive or reflex muscular contractions.”[[253]](#footnote-253) Like Lavater, he proposed that meanings produced on the face and body had their roots ultimately in “the spirit…the source of expression [which] activates the muscles that portray our emotions on the face with characteristic patterns.” He also had a resolute belief in his own capacity to define these primordial expressive categories, offering a list of 33 including “Meditation, False laughter, Ironic laughter, Sad reflection [and] Sensual delirium.” “I cannot be accused of enumerating them arbitrarily,” he argued, “for the expressions I induce are produced by the soul itself, as it paints them on the face of man,” apparently unaware of the glaring contradiction inherent in the fact that it was not the divine soul, but his artificial mechanism which produced the patterns he read off the countenances of his subjects..[[254]](#footnote-254)

In his biographical sketch of Duchenne, Cuthbertson is keen to distance his subject from Lavater, suggesting that “[Duchenne] was interested in the plasticity of the mask itself and not the character behind the mask.”[[255]](#footnote-255) This distinction, as we shall soon see, will not survive even the most cursory engagement with Duchenne’s writing, and probably constitutes an attempt to protect his scientific legacy from association with the discredited discipline of physiognomy and an acknowledged crackpot like Lavater. Duchenne himself was extremely complimentary to his predecessor, arguing that he “touched on physiological questions, which according to the author (and this is also my opinion), had never been tackled in the best treatises of anatomy and physiology published before him.” His critique of Lavater did not amount to a repudiation of his theses, but rather an admonishment of his neglect of the mobile aspects of human expression: “He certainly would not have neglected as much as he did of the study of facial expression in movement, which should serve as the basis for the examination of the physiognomy at rest, had he been either anatomist or a physiologist or a doctor or even a naturalist.” [[256]](#footnote-256)

**“As Truthful as a Mirror”**

Notwithstanding their differences regarding the priority of the “hard” as opposed to the “soft” features of the face, Lavater and Duchenne were alike in believing that the face’s meanings were the direct expression of the human spirit in general and the personality of the individual in particular. The material distinction between their systems does not originate at the level of epistemology, but rather at that of technological media. Duchenne had access to an experimental apparatus of which Lavater could only dream; but he would find that his technology produced its own contradictions which could only be ameliorated by a kind of ideological legerdemain. The most fundamental of these was rooted in his insistence that “the movements of facial expression are not controlled by the will, as are those of the limbs or trunk. Only the soul has the faculty of producing them truly.” “Smiling,” he wrote, “does not just indicate inner contentment, it also shows *kindliness*, that happy disposition of the soul that makes one sympathetic to the trials of others, sometimes to the point of *pity*.”[[257]](#footnote-257) But the smiles he elicited from his subjects were not produced by the soul, but the application of an electrical current. His electrodes might have raised a grin, but they did not create inner contentment, or kindliness or sympathy in the bodies to which they were applied. Far from illuminating the connection between the face and the soul, Duchenne’s work actually institutes an absolute rupture by demonstrating that the expressive muscles can do their work perfectly well without reference to any internal homunculus, except for the genie of electricity. This is an antinomy which his theory goes to extraordinary lengths to obfuscate, circumvent or otherwise deny.

If Duchenne’s electrophysiological tools had the effect of disarticulating the face from the soul, it was the other part of his apparatus which was supposed to fuse them back together again. The photographic camera, we must continually remind ourselves, was at this point no less of a futuristic gadget than Duchenne’s nest of magnets and wires, with its electrodes halfway between chopsticks and callipers. *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression* is remarkable for both the quantity and quality of its photographic illustrations, which Duchenne superintended at every stage from production to publication. If electrophysiology was the method through which he arrived at his discoveries, then photography was the tool which would allow him to communicate them to the public.

Only photography, as truthful as a mirror…allowed me to compose an album of figures that illustrate my lectures on the electrophysiological experiments I have performed on the face of man…Photographic figures that represent, as in nature, the expressive traits assigned to the muscles that interpret the emotions ,teach a thousand times more than extensive written descriptions.[[258]](#footnote-258)

Photography both represents nature with perfect transparency and communicates those representations with emphatic immediacy. Photographic evidence would demonstrate the homology between the expressions that Duchenne was able to elicit with his electrophysiological apparatus and the everyday smiles and frowns that all of us recognize as a matter of course, indicating that his experiments did no more than illustrate the spiritual-expressive forms already inherent in the face. Such was Duchenne’s faith in the evidentiary force of his photographs that he even proposed that “I could have just just published the album of these electrophysiological photographs of the face, with a few explanatory notes, and still showed the accuracy of my new and important propositions outlined above. My task would have been much easier; but I am obliged to discuss some anatomical and physiological findings that could not be placed in the captions to the plates of the album.”[[259]](#footnote-259)

Duchenne’s assertion of the transparency of his method obscure the laborious efforts he went to in order to produce photographs which presented the face in precisely the manner he desired, a process which was ultimately just as arcane and laborious as electrophysiology. With a characteristic lack of self-awareness, he quite candidly explains the protracted cycle of trial and error that went into the creation of his illustrations. He writes:

From 1852, convinced of the impossibility of popularizing or even of publishing this research without the aid of photography, I approached some talented and artistic photographers. These first trials were not, and could not be, successful. In photography, as in painting or sculpture, you can only transmit well what you perceive well. Art does not rely only on technical skills. For my research, it was necessary to know how to put each expressive line into relief by a skilful play of light. This skill was beyond the most dextrous artist; he did not understand the physiological facts I was trying to demonstrate.

The various “artistic” photographers whom Duchenne approached turned out to be unfit for purpose, not because they were not masters of the photographic apparatus but because they could not grasp the precise aesthetic requirements necessary to demonstrate Duchenne’s ideas. For this reason, he concluded that he had to “initiate myself into the art of photography.” He set about this task with great élan, undaunted by its manifold complications.[[260]](#footnote-260)

Perhaps the fundamental technical difficulty he encountered was the temporal disjunction between the two elements of his experimental apparatus. The utility of the electrodes was not only that it allowed him to produce expressive effects at will, but also that it sustained it for longer than would generally be the case were it elicited spontaneously. The electrical current, as it were, reached into the body and wrenched the expressive gesture out of its concrete duration, dragging it out onto the exposed ground of the face and imposing on it a photographic discipline and a photographic temporality before the cap was even removed from the lens. However, the muscular contraction it produced was neither perfectly constant nor permanent. “Although my electrical induction apparatus is of great precision and was adjusted for each of these electrophysiological experiments,” he admitted, “it was still impossible to maintain these muscular contractions at the same degree for a long time; the irritability of a muscle, after some seconds of continuous contraction, seemed to weaken under the influence of a current of high frequency.” Meanwhile, whilst the cameras available to him operated much faster than Cornelius’ glacial contraption, even an exposure time of five or six seconds could create potentially disastrous complications. To this end, Duchenne recounts, “I needed to obtain German objective lenses, which were the only ones able to operate with enough speed.” For all their rapidity, however, these German lenses came with their own drawbacks – they “produced slight distortions and lacked so much depth of field that if, for example, the eye of my subject was in focus, the nose and the ear would be slightly out of focus. Often, if I wanted to highlight certain expressive traits and show them distinctness, I was forced to sacrifice others, which in terms of photography were *blurred*.”[[261]](#footnote-261) In other words, the technical properties of the lens performed their own analytical deconstruction of the face’s features, against which Duchenne was obliged to struggle to impose his own account of its significance. Certain trade-offs were unavoidable. Either one area of the face would be highlighted at the expense of all others, or a general equilibrium could be purchased at the cost of an overall reduction in clarity.

It takes a great deal of effort, it turns out, to produce a transparent depiction of nature as it truly appears. The creation of the eighty-four plates that adorn *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression* was a delicate and painstaking process, requiring care and skill both on the part of Duchenne and Adrian Tournachon, brother of Nadar, the one professional photographer who proved to have the necessary chops. Again, Duchenne’s habit is not to deny the artificiality of his images but instead to argue that the artistic mechanisms through which he created them actually contributes to their truth-value:

In actual fact, these photographic imperfections do not alter the truth and clarity of the expressive lines. Moreover, we will see that generally the distribution of light is quite in harmony with the emotions that the expressive lines represent. Thus the plates that portray the sombre passions, the sinister ones: *aggression*, *wickedness*, *suffering*, *pain*, *fright*, *torture mingled with dread*, gain singularly in energy under the influence of chiaroscuro; they resemble the style of Rembrandt.[[262]](#footnote-262)

The tendency reaches its apogee in the so-called “Aesthetic Section”, of Duchenne’s book, where, as opposed to the relatively plain images of the preceding “Scientific Section”, he places his subjects in theatrical settings with costumes and props, accompanying each picture with a little precis of the scene portrayed. Lady Macbeth is represented “falling onto a seat and restraining the violent beating of her heart. But her heart is made of bronze, we know from the hard gaze and the wicked attitude that she still retains.”[[263]](#footnote-263) A mother experiences a wrenching combination of “pain and joy”, as one of her children is taken by illness whilst the other lives through it.[[264]](#footnote-264)

At first glance these absurdly froufrou concoctions would be unremarkable instances of contemporary Victorian portraiture in its theatrical mode, were it not for the visible presence of the scientist and his electrodes in the shot, sometimes manifested as no more than a comically disembodied hand poking in from stage-left. However, on closer examination it becomes clear that Duchenne is actually attempting something quite astonishing. Not content to produce a series of static tableaux, he endeavours to imbue his images with the qualities of dramatic narrative (as well as to showcase the capabilities of his electrophysiological apparatus) by using his electrodes to simultaneously stimulate multiple distinct and even contradictory expressions on a single face. Witness his description of plate seventy-six, which portrays a woman in costume as a nun at prayer, with electrodes positioned so as to create an expression of “deep sorrow” on the left side of her face and “divine ecstatic joy” on the right:

Look…at Plate 76 as a whole: The scene enlarges and changes completely. This upturned look, instead of evoking remembrance, tells us that the young woman’s spirit is being exalted by her ardent faith…If you cover the eye and forehead of the left side, the sadness of her features…makes you feel that she is not leaving her dearest loved ones without some regrets. And if you cover the eye and forehead of the other side, you see that her sacrifice is sorrowful; you feel the heart of the nun, who is perhaps leaving her dear mother and family, has not yet been withered through the exaltation of religious feelings.[[265]](#footnote-265)

The image is certainly striking, but not in way that Duchenne apparently intended. Its impression as a whole, to this viewer at least, is of an individual being subjected to some unthinkable torture, and insofar as it activates feelings of sympathy, they are generally concerned with how it might be possible to extract this unfortunate from the grips of the madman who is abusing her. Certainly, without Duchenne’s pious and sentimental gloss it is difficult to imagine how anyone would arrive at the “appropriate” conclusion.

**Cinematic Dreams**

Nonetheless, the way that he asks us to interact with his photograph is completely fascinating. By commanding us to cover different areas of the face to produce distinct expressive effects, he compels us to participate in the analytic deconstruction of the face that his apparatus has begun. Effectively, the viewer is encouraged to break the picture open, on the one hand to adjust its framing and proximity according to Duchenne’s instructions, on the other to decompose its simultaneity into a sequence of images through which the little drama of Duchenne’s imagination can play out. These contrivances give the lie to one of his central claims – that his mechanism enables him to capture “the orthography of facial expression in movement.”[[266]](#footnote-266) Of course, movement is one thing that a photograph can never depict. Only by congealing the face’s expressive motion into the “spatial configuration of a moment” – that is to say, only be imposing photographic discipline upon the face – can it be represented as such.

We can go further than this. Duchenne’s “aesthetic” portraits do not only demonstrate his implicit understanding of and frustration with the limitations of the photographic, they also disclose a prophetic desire which by its very nature he could neither conceptualise nor communicate. Duchenne is dreaming of the cinematic. What are his injunctions to focus in on a particular portion of the face, but close-ups? What are the transitions between them if not cuts? And what is entailed by the idea of stringing them together into a narrative other than editing? Without having any inkling of or interest in the development of cinematic technology, Duchenne longs for a technology that could somehow document the semiotic structures he discovers in the face without reducing them to dead tableaux; his every bumbling appearance in his own images expresses the wish for a mechanism which would allow him to dissect and reconstruct the face without having to visibly impinge upon the picture. Had he been born fifty years later, perhaps Duchenne would have been a director.

At the most fundamental level, we must attribute this proleptic description of cinema to a desire for control over the limits and contents of “human expression.” Duchenne is attempting to establish a system of faciality, in precisely the terms described by Deleuze and Guattari: “a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations.”[[267]](#footnote-267) We can see this clearly enough in his continuous efforts to police the distinction between “meaningful” facial expressions and “grimaces”, an endeavour which quickly becomes absurd in light of his electrophysiologically produced composite faces. “The faces of the aesthetic section will at first sight seem like mere grimaces to those without the key to my experiments,” he wrote. “Thus I repeat that the isolated electrical contraction of the muscles that produce the different expressions on each side of a face can in fact only display a grimace, if we look at both sides of the face simultaneously.”[[268]](#footnote-268) In other words, even within the artificial confines of Duchenne’s photography, we must only look at the image in exactly the way proscribed, else we risk confounding significant expressions with nonsensical gurns. This is manifestly a distinction that can only be sustained by *fiat*; it is perfectly possible to imagine meanings for the faces whose forms that Duchenne disqualifies as grimaces, even those which would be physiologically impossible without the aid of electrophysiology. The segregation that Duchenne is trying to maintain here would only be tenable if facial meaning were purely a function of physical structure. Since it is in fact an intersubjective, social process, there is no way to rule particular facial forms meaningless or otherwise outside of a given set of circumstances.

**Prostration of the Features**

The disciplinary function inherent to Duchenne’s thought is also evident in his relationships with his experimental subjects. This is palpable enough in the pictures themselves, which resemble scenes from some infernal torture chamber, Duchenne and his assistants leaning over their victims like gargoyles, the sitter seemingly pinned down and splayed open like a vivisected specimen. The impression is only reinforced by Duchenne’s own accounts of his dealings with them. He described his favoured subject as “a toothless old man, with a thin face, whose features, without being absolutely ugly, approached the ordinary triviality and whose facial expression was in perfect agreement with his inoffensive character and his restricted intelligence.” In addition to these qualifications, the old man (of whose name we are never informed) was “suffering from a complicated anaesthetic condition of the face [which meant that] I was able to experiment on his face without causing him pain, to the extent that I could stimulate his individual muscles with as much precision and accuracy as if I were working with a still irritable cadaver.” Finally, he was “of too low intelligence or too poorly motivated to produce himself the expressions that I have produced artificially on his face,” making him the ideal blank canvas for Duchenne’s electrophysiological demonstrations.[[269]](#footnote-269)

This poor anonymous fellow, subjected to all manner of indignities across dozens of photographic plates, is emblematic of the type of person Duchenne typically chose for his experiments. The mentally and physically infirm, the elderly, the institutionalised – Duchenne invariably chooses individuals whose social standing leaves them at his disposal and in his power. Of the visually-impaired woman who was the model for the majority of his “aesthetic” portraits, Duchenne wrote, “She cannot understand the gestures or the poses that I show her, so that I am obliged to position her and dress her as if she were a mannequin.”[[270]](#footnote-270) Meanwhile, he recounts a story of a forty-two-year-old subject who was at the time of the experiment undergoing treatment for *delirium tremens*. Part of his prescription was a “large dose of opium”, which meant that his face tended to be slack and inexpressive and his reactions dulled, which was all to the good as far as Duchenne was concerned: “I used this prostration of the features produced by opium, and above all the drooping of the labial commissures, to study the expressive effect of combining all the transverse part of *m. nasalis* with *m. depressor anguli oris*.”[[271]](#footnote-271) The expressive effect of exciting this combination of muscles, shown on Plate Forty-Two, was “libidinous gaiety at its most gross stage.” So far as Duchenne was concerned, this did not simply constitute a demonstration of the actions of “muscle of lubricity”, but also a reversion of the man’s features to their true state, before they were deadened by opium:

This man, before his features were sunken by opium, had a face that was totally different…these features proclaimed a habitual gaiety, and the form and attitude of his nostrils declared a very lascivious temperament…The information I have gathered on this point convinced me that I was not mistaken! The experiment shown in Plate 42 proved that the muscle of lubricity was well developed in this man. Thus I could create this brutal passion on his facial features that were momentarily masked by the narcotic.[[272]](#footnote-272) (77)

In other words, Duchenne believed that his electrodes had succeeded in revealing the true nature of this man, concealed behind the opioid fog. Just as much as Lavater, he believed in the face as the site where an innate class hierarchy was inscribed upon the body. This becomes all the clearer when we contrast what we have seen above with his treatment of his higher-class subjects (collaborators might in their case be a better term). Duchenne tells us of “an artist of talent and at the same time an anatomist who was interested enough to undergo this study on himself. By calling on his feelings, he could produce perfectly most of the expression portrayed by each of the muscles of the eyebrow.”[[273]](#footnote-273) Meanwhile, he also informs us of his experiments upon a young artist by the name of Jules Talrich:

As much as I tried, by tormenting these muscles, I could not create a completely wicked expression, one of hatred, which I could in others obtain easily…Whatever he does, he cannot give his face an expression of hardness, of aggression, or of wickedness. This fact may be explained by the paucity of development of the muscles that represent this emotion – muscles that, in his case, obey only the electrodes.[[274]](#footnote-274)

It is obvious enough which kinds of individuals are granted autonomy over their expressive powers, and which are subjected to Duchenne’s disciplinary mechanism; who has the privilege to express their essence, and who has a face imposed on them from without. Talrich is supposedly of such a pure disposition that his face could not possibly inhabit an expression of wickedness, whilst lasciviousness fits the countenance of the mental patient like a glove (incidentally, Duchenne airily informs us that the latter individual “succumbed to *delirium tremens* ten days after his experiment.”)[[275]](#footnote-275) Class is an inherent structuring principle of Duchenne’s signifying order, dictating which expressions are appropriate to which faces and vice versa. He even took it upon himself to take a dig a Caravaggio, opining that “while admiring Caravaggio’s science of chiaroscuro, I cannot admire the famous master’s practice of always finding the models for his most sublime religious scenes in gambling dens and cabarets.”[[276]](#footnote-276)

Duchenne is in many ways a confounding figure. A legitimate medical pioneer, his work is nonetheless riddled with specious flummery and special pleading. He occupies an equally deserved place in the histories of neurology, anatomy, psychology and physiognomic pseudoscience. A transitional figure, he looks simultaneously forward into a future of MRI scans and facial recognition technology, and back to the silhouette-making and skull-measuring of a Lavater. There are implications in his work which are only now being fully worked out, as we shall see in our encounter with the works of Dutch artist Arthur Elsenaar in Chapter Five. If he is remembered in certain quarters only as the father of neurology and not the man who rampaged across 19th century Paris jabbing electrodes into the faces of the indigent and the sick, then scientific history is the poorer for it.

In terms of the history of the relationship between the face and visual technology, he is a uniquely important figure. In the unselfconscious theatricality of his electrophysiological demonstrations, he grants us an explicit performance of the disciplinary transformation wrought upon the face in the second half of the nineteenth century. We see quite literally the interpenetration of the face by the apparatus, the forceful, even violent nature of its transition from the obscurity of the local and the private into the space of the general visual economy, where its meanings will be decided according to a universal standard. We witness also the heroic figure of the bourgeois technologist who brings the face to light. The value of Duchenne’s photography is that it exposes the way in which the technological structure of the camera feeds back upon the face, reconfiguring its temporality, transforming it into something that it ready to be photographed. He enacts for us the disciplinary process which is implicit in every photographic act, and so doing awakens us to the potential, inherent in every face, to resist its spatializing imperative.

There is an instructive coda to this story. In 1872, Charles Darwin published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, a revolutionary work which sought to demonstrate the evolutionary roots of expressive behaviours. Darwin proposed that rather than evolving for that explicit purpose, the expressive faculties of humans and all other animals had arisen out of features which had originally evolved for some other reason – a theory he called “the principle of serviceable associated habits.”[[277]](#footnote-277) The contraction of the brow, for instance, is a physiologically necessary component of the act of screaming which has, through the process of association, become “firmly associated with the incipient sense of something distressing or disagreeable” even when the scream itself is absent.[[278]](#footnote-278) Needless to say, this proposition directly contradicted all theories based on the notion of expression as a divine provision, including both Lavaterian physiognomy and the work of Duchenne. Physiognomy is dismissed with a curt-half sentence on the first page of Darwin’s book; of Duchenne he is respectfully silent.

Darwin’s reluctance to criticise Duchenne can likely be attributed to a combination of politeness and gratitude. As he assembled the materials which would come together to form *The Expression of the Emotions*, he engaged himself in a search for images he could use to illustrate his text. In the course of this endeavour he encountered difficulties, which he explained in what ought by now to be a quite familiar manner:

The study of Expression is difficult, owing to the movements being often extremely slight, and of a fleeting nature. A difference may be clearly perceived, and yet it may be impossible, at least I have found it so, to state in what the difference consists. When we witness any deep emotion, our sympathy is so strongly excited, that close observation is forgotten or rendered almost impossible; of which fact I have had many curious proofs. Our imagination is another and still more serious source of error; for if from the nature of the circumstances we expect to see any expression, we readily imagine its presence.[[279]](#footnote-279)

Accordingly, photography recommended itself to Darwin as a propitious resource. However, lacking the resources and the expertise of a Duchenne, he was obliged to secure his illustrations second-hand. One of his primary collaborators in this regard was the photographic impresario Oscar Gustav Rejlander, who provided a ranged of staged photographs demonstrating various facial expressions, including a number which he performed himself. Darwin also turned to Duchenne, who allowed him to reproduce a couple of the images from *the Mechanism* for his book, notwithstanding the fundamental disagreement that lay at the root of their theories.

This was nearly two decades before the process of half-tone printing made the reproduction of photographs a trivial matter, so Darwin commissioned an engraver to take copies from the original – but not without first suggesting a few amendments, as Philip Prodger explains:

Darwin instructed the engraver to remove the hands of the experimenter and the electrical probes visible in Duchenne’s photographs from his engraved copy. Areas of the subject’s forehead and neck that had been obstructed in the Duchenne original were extrapolated by the Darwin engraver…Duchenne’s photographs were too honest, in that they recorded the actual situation of the sitter in his laboratory environment.[[280]](#footnote-280)

The erasure of Duchenne’s hand is a profoundly symbolic gesture, representing the subsumption of the contradictions and disjunctures which originally defined the staging of the face before the camera into the increasing seamlessness of the photographic apparatus. The tension which defined an image such as *Seated Couple* is smoothed away by the establishment of a complacent fellowship between face and camera. And yet, insofar as there must always remain a fundamental discontinuity between the concrete duration in which a face is lived and witnessed, and the static instant in which it appears as a photograph, there is always the possibility that this gap may make itself known in the texture of the image, no matter how instantaneous the photographic process becomes. This irreducible remainder preserves the face’s capacity for reticence, obscurity and resistance, even to this day.

**Chapter Three: We Had Faces**

“Alright Mr. DeMille, I’m ready for my close up.”[[281]](#footnote-281)

These are, of course, the famous last words of deranged former silent movie icon Norma Desmond (portrayed onscreen by actual former silent movie icon Gloria Swanson) in Billy Wilder’s classic meta-noir *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). As she speaks, she rounds on the camera, claw-like hand extended, head tilted back so that she comes at us jaw-first, mouth slicing through the middle of the shot like the “prow of the animal”, to borrow Bataille’s memorable phrase. The camera is stock-still, paralyzed perhaps, so that Norma actually moves herself into close-up rather than the other way around. She glides forward from the depths of the frame, crushing the dimensions of the shot between the lens and her looming visage. Her hand traces a languid motion halfway between a grasp and a caress, whilst her face remains almost entirely rigid, eyes staring straight down the bridge of her nose like a gun-barrel, mouth opened to display a rank of perfect white teeth, neither smiling or scowling, in fact signifying precisely nothing beyond their whiteness and their perfection. As she advances her face fills the screen; simultaneously the image blurs, fading to grey. There is an instant where only its primal outline remains, the shadow of the jaw, the dark crescent of the mouth, the dim triangle of nose and eyes standing out against the pale ellipse of the skull – a death’s head. The movie ends.

This shot is Norma Desmond’s final vengeance upon the world of *Sunset Boulevard*, upon the Hollywood of the 40s and 50s, of continuity editing, synchronised dialogue, and the corrosive cynicism of the film noir. The face which she reveals, occupying the dead centre of the frame, swallowing all sense of realistic space and obliterating the background, is not of this world. Rather it is, like Norma herself, the relic of an older cinematic milieu – the silent cinema of the 1910s and 20s. This “silent face,” as Jacques Aumont explains, “is an immediate face, in both senses. It gives itself whole and at once; it presents itself to the intuition, and is not for deciphering. It is not a montage, a deliberate composite…but something organic, living.” [[282]](#footnote-282) It is the face that Roland Barthes dreamed of in his essay on Garbo, belonging “to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost one‘s self in a human image as one would in a philtre, when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh.” The astonishment inspired by the earliest cinematic exhibitions is often evoked by those infamous fables of the crowds who fled their seats in terror, convinced that the Lumière brothers’ train was going to come crashing through the screen. Likewise, the first filmic faces have their own legends, of people driven to states of transportive ecstasy by the sight of the human visage blown up ten-feet tall, its features spread out like the landscape of some alien planet or the deep ocean floor. “A few years earlier,” writes Barthes, tongue in cheek and hand on heart, “the face of Valentino was causing suicides; that of Garbo still partakes of the same rule of Courtly Love, where the flesh gives rise to mystical feelings of perdition.”[[283]](#footnote-283)

Earlier in the film, Norma sits down with her script-editor-cum-gigolo Joe Gillis (William Holden) to enjoy one of her old movies.[[284]](#footnote-284) Enraptured by the sight of her younger self in close-up, she enthuses, “Still wonderful, isn’t it? And no dialogue. We didn’t need dialogue, we had faces. There just aren’t any faces like that anymore.” Norma conjures the notion of a cinematic face that communicates without reference to a “parasitic verbal discourse”, expressing itself so totally that words are redundant, and an entire drama is condensed to the tremor of a lip or the flicker of an eyelash. Of course, this face is a mirage. It is not just that the concept overlooks the role of intertitles in supplementing visual meaning – it also ignores the extended repertoire of other meaning-making techniques evident in early film, from music to editing to *mise-en-scène*. The filmic face was never a self-sufficient or “immediate” signifier; its valences were always supplemented or modalized by other kinds of information. The “silent face” is, for Norma, a narcissistic fantasy, whilst for film as an artform it is the dream of a kind of pure cinema that signifies solely through visual means, without leaning on the resources of literature, drama, set design or any other ancillary medium.

All the same, the silent face is also an empirical fact. Not, perhaps, in quite as emphatic a form as proposed by Norma, Aumont or Barthes, but we only have to watch a few of the films of Griffith, Eisenstein, DeMille or the early Sternberg to find ourselves repeatedly confronted with faces that fill the screen and seem to press back against the very lens of the camera, addressing us with a directness and an intensity that is strange, unsettling, even illegible to the modern viewer. Whilst the face of Sessue Hayakawa in the climactic courtroom scene of DeMille’s race-baiting melodrama *The Cheat* (1915) may not generate its meaning independent of the various techniques that couch it, it is nonetheless lingered over at such length (with a circular matte used to separate it from its immediate surroundings) that its ambiguous sensitivity subverts and even transcends the stereotypically sinister significance that the narrative attempts to impose on it.[[285]](#footnote-285) Likewise, the face of the mother who watches her child trampled to death in the “Odessa Steps” sequence of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) obliterates the frame that would contain it, a sequence of shots that would seem crass or absurd transposed into a contemporary film, whilst remaining utterly horrifying in its original context.[[286]](#footnote-286) And what is the concluding shot of *Sunset Boulevard* other than a final, terrible validation of Norma’s claim that the face of silent cinema contained a force that the talkie simply could not comprehend? In her words, “I am big. It’s the pictures that got small.”

*Sunset Boulevard* is, of course, a signal instance of precisely the sort of picture that Norma is bemoaning – a fast-talking, cynical noir, explicitly concerned with exposing the dark underside of the Hollywood legends to which she so desperately clings. Stylistically, it stages a struggle between the developing formal consensus of post-war American cinema, represented both by Holden’s understated, naturalistic manner and by the film’s adherence to the principles of continuity editing, and a more gestural and symbolic cinematic mode, embodied by Swanson’s operatic performance and associated through her with the silent era. Logically enough, this conflict revolves around the question of language. As a screenwriter, Gillis is for Norma a figure of ambivalence, the agent (as she sees it) of her demise, but also potentially her deliverance. On their first meeting, she accuses Gillis and his ilk of conspiring with pusillanimous moneymen to destroy old Hollywood: “You are [a writer]? Writing words, words, more words. Well you’ve made a rope of words and strangled this business, haha. But there’s a microphone right there to catch the last gurgles, and Technicolor to photograph the red swollen tongue!” However, she then immediately commissions him to work on the screenplay for her comeback film, hoping that he’ll be able to turn her attempted adaptation of the tale of Salome into something that will fly with his bosses.

Having leafed through Norma’s script (which he privately deems “a silly hodgepodge of melodramatic plots”), Gillis suggests to her that it “ought to be organized. Just an editing job.” Of course, Gillis lacks both the talent and the inclination to make anything of Norma’s chaotic, self-indulgent draft, and plans instead to string her along and pocket her money. Nevertheless, his words *do* acquire an organizing structural importance within *Sunset Boulevard* as a whole. Everything the film shows us is framed by his sardonic voiceover, a kind of half baked (or if you prefer, soft-boiled) pastiche of the conventional noir gumshoe monologue, a deflationary drone which seeks at every turn to reduce splendorous facades – Norma’s dilapidated mansion, the wooden sets of Paramount Studios, and of course Norma herself – to crumbling, moth-eaten mundanity. This “rope of words” coils around and through the entire film, aiming above all else to discipline Norma’s extravagant performativity by contrasting it with the sad, bathetic fact of her life as a washed-up movie star, discarded and forgotten by the world that made her. She is sustained by the delusion that she will remain a star for just as long as she continues to act like one, a conviction that is not simply a matter of melodramatic pronouncements and doomed comeback plans. It is materialised in her every gesture, from the way her spidery fingers constantly trace filigrees in the air around her to the haughty angle at which her head tilts back from the camera, such that she somehow seems always to be looking simultaneously up into the firmament and down upon whoever is talking to her. Gillis’ monologue is supposed to make this rococo physicality seem absurd, over the top and out of date, the behaviour of a person in flight from reality (“Norma, you’re a woman of fifty, now grow up,” he pleads, as she sinks irretrievably into her fantasy, “There’s nothing tragic about being fifty, not unless you try to be twenty-five!”). The point of the voiceover, then, is not simply to undermine or contradict Norma’s self-presentation, but rather to historicise it in relation to the narrative of Hollywood’s transition from the era of silent movies and studio monopolies to that of synchronised sound, film noir and the Paramount Decision.

Gillis’ first note on Norma’s script is that it needs “a little more dialogue.” “What for?” Norma responds, “I can say anything I want with my eyes.” Norma understands perfectly well, but is characteristically unable to confront, the contradiction implicit in this exchange. With every line of dialogue added to the script, the “rope of words” tightens a little more, siphoning off the meaning that *should* be communicated through her body, her gestures, her face and her eyes into the sphere of language. Dialogue does more than compete with or supplement the face’s meaning – it imposes its grammar onto the very structure of film in way that is fundamentally inimical to the style of performative expressivity that Norma prizes. Once dialogue becomes the primary conveyer of narrative information, its intelligibility becomes a priority that bears constantly on both the composition of shots and their editing. Speech must be clearly audible, and it must be evident at any given moment which character is speaking and to whom. These necessities automatically favour the shot-reverse shot pattern as the standard way of organizing interactions between characters, a structure which tends to constrain the relationship between camera and performer to a static medium shot, and obliges the face to perform a set of primarily functional tasks whose significance is parasitic upon the contents of the dialogue. The role of the face becomes to indicate which person is speaking and to whom their discourse is addressed, to register reactions and intentions the meanings of which are given by the conversational context, or to refine, emphasize or at most contradict what is being said. No longer can it be imagined to be the “immediate” source of its own truths.

Moreover, the semantic primacy of speech is intimately connected to the system of continuity editing. The continuity system establishes the maintenance of a realistic, three-dimensional visual space as the governing principle of film grammar, legislating in turn a set of rules dictating the ways in which different types of shot can be combined to produce a meaningful whole. Shots with the potential to disrupt this process – such as the extreme close-up, which can work to compress the depth of the filmic world and to abstract its object from its surroundings – must be carefully rationed, whilst every effort is made to hide the cut through matches on action, motion or graphical correspondence. Whilst the continuity principle predates the advent of sychronised sound, the latter is nevertheless one of the most important reasons that the former was adopted as an element of the international film style which developed in the second half of the twentieth century. The addition of sound to the motion picture creates an aural space which is required both to be internally consistent *and* to match the dimensions of the visual space created by the sequence of shots. Sound perspective and visual perspective must be aligned, such that, for instance, a gunshot which occurs relatively “far away” in the frame produces a correspondingly faint noise, and vice versa. Presuming that the intelligibility of speech is, as Mary Ann Doane puts it, the “primary consideration” in the construction of a film’s aural space (as it is in all but the most ornery of narrative films – think for instance of Godard’s *Le Mépris* (1963)), this results in a complex network of incentives and necessities which will tend to organise the scene’s spatial composition around the clear presentation of patterns of dialogue.[[287]](#footnote-287)

It is not that this structure necessarily pre-determines the meanings that a face can embody on film. But it does impose on it a set of responsibilities which militate against the kind of immediate expressivity of which Norma so emphatically reminisces. In the context of the system of audio-visual continuity, the face is required to indicate the relative position of people and objects in space, to show the direction of a character’s attention, and to knit shots together through the use of eyeline matches. It is engaged in a complex supplementary relationship with dialogue, which can be complementary or antagonistic in all sorts of fascinating ways, but must fundamentally deny the face the kind of absolute sovereignty claimed for it by Norma. These constraints are not absolute, but when they are breached we feel their power. This is why films which seek to systematically extract the face from the workaday rhythms of continuity – pictures like Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), Cassavetes’ *Faces* (1968), Kiarostami’s *Shirin* (2008) or Malick’s *To the Wonder* (2012) – strike us as such challenging and radical experiences.

Norma’s face presents a potentially terminal threat to this system. By blotting out the background and closing the distance between the object and the frame, it disrupts the sense of a coherent scenic space; by seeming to address the viewer directly through the membrane of the screen, it breaches the illusion of a complete and self-contained three-dimensional film world; by purporting to signify all on its own, it rebels against the semantic primacy of verbal language. Throughout the main bulk of the film, Gillis’ “rope of words” provides the frame for our understanding of Norma, presenting her to us as a pitiably delusional figure, her body, gestures and face laughably out of place and time. At the finale, however, this dynamic is reversed. When Norma shoots Gillis rather than allowing him to leave her (“No one ever leaves a star. That’s what makes one a star”), we are reminded of what we had known from the opening sequence – that for the entire duration of this film the narrator has been floating face-down, dead, in Norma’s pool. His wry words were nothing more than a posthumous attempt to put his spin on events that had already overtaken him. Meanwhile, everything ends with Norma’s face, advancing on the audience with infernal implacability, spreading across the screen until nothing else remains. It is language, ultimately, that proves to be mortal, whilst the silent face persists in transcendent unlife.

*Sunset Boulevard* presents the silent face as a revenant out of cinema’s past, repressed but not fully exorcised by the aural-spatial forms of diegetic organisation that have come to dominate narrative film since the advent of synchronised sound. The rest of this chapter will return to that para-mythic period out of which Norma’s visage emerges, a time when it did indeed seem to some that the some that the entire essence of the cinematic artform could be condensed into the image of the face on the screen. In the interregnum between the first stirrings of narrative film around the turn of the century to the last knockings of the silent movie in the late 1920s, the possibilities of the cinematic face were probed and its properties debated, and for a feverish, utopian moment it even appeared that a filmmaker’s attitude to the presentation of faces encompassed all of the decisive formal, political and philosophical questions pertaining to their work. This was also a period in which both filmmakers and critics dared to think of cinema as more than entertainment, explicitly approaching it as a technology with the potential to rewire human perception and transform global society, in part through a revolutionary metamorphosis of how the face was experienced and understood.

**A New Face**

There is a scene midway through *Sunset Boulevard* in which Gillis watches Norma play bridge with a trio of old Hollywood friends he cruelly describes as her “waxworks” (played by H.B. Warner, Anna Q. Nilsson and, most melancholy of all, a sallow and sad-eyed Buster Keaton, whose only lines are to repeatedly pass on his turn). I like to imagine a fifth figure around this table, even though he would be one too many to join the card game. His name is Béla Balázs, a Hungarian film theorist, critic, screenwriter and revolutionary communist, and his work communicates, more than that of any other writer of the time, the sheer foreignness of the ways in which the face could be experienced and discussed in early silent film. Balázs’ theories express both the pastness of the silent face and its disturbing persistence, and as a figure he encapsulates, both in word and deed, the bizarre, fantastical and even horrific excesses that were propounded in its name. His writings manifest Norma’s extravagance, her intensity and her death-drive as film-philosophy. They belong together.

Béla Balázs was born in Szeged, southern Hungary, in 1884. His Jewish German-Hungarian parents named him Herbert Bauer; he adopted his more overtly Hungarian *nom de plume* when he began his writing career in 1900, “as the signal of a commitment to a revived vernacular Hungarian tradition.” His early career was as eventful as it was diverse. He was a good friend of the modernist composers Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, both of whom adapted poems by Balázs into librettos, with the latter also accompanying the musicians on trips across the Hungarian provinces, collecting “phonographic recordings and musical transcriptions of Magyar, Romanian, Slovak, Ruthenian, Serbian, Romany and Arab folk songs.” He was also part of a prominent Budapest literary circle including Georg Lukács, one of his closest companions. Alongside Lukács, Balázs took up an official role in the ill-fated Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, serving as “head of the Governing Council’s literary department” until the collapse of the regime in November forced him to flee to Vienna – an exile which would last until the end of the Second World War.[[288]](#footnote-288)

Balázs’ formal association with cinema began in 1922, when he took a job reviewing films for the Viennese newspaper *Der Tag*. After his move to Berlin in 1926, he would produce a series of screenplays for the German cinema, as well as involving himself in several organisations dedicated to the production and circulation of leftist film and drama, but it was from this initial experience as a critic that his film-theoretical ideas initially sprang. His articles for *Der Tag* (of which, Carter tells us, he produced over two hundred) formed the basis of a longer treatise entitled *Visible Man*, which upon publication in 1924 became the first book-length study of film aesthetics in the German language.[[289]](#footnote-289) He would elaborate his views seven years later in *The Spirit of Film*, arriving at a critical perspective which would remain essentially unchanged for the rest of his life. His fundamental contributions to the development of film theory, as well as the broader philosophical scaffolding which supported them, are predominantly contained in those first two books.

*Visible Man* was a project of no modest ambition, to put it mildly. Cinema, as Balázs saw it, was not just a new form of narrative art or entertainment, but the technological basis of a new mode of visuality, with the potential to bring about a millennial transfiguration in the cultural, political and even physiological constitution of the human being. It was the destiny of the cinematograph, he claimed, to “[give] culture a new turn towards the visual and the human being a new face.”[[290]](#footnote-290) This last phrase was meant to encompass every plausible metaphorical connotation, whilst also being perfectly literal. It was Balázs’ sincere belief that the global dissemination of film technology would precipitate material changes both in the visual mechanisms of face perception and the expressive structure of the face itself, transformations which would in turn bring about a revolution in humanity’s spiritual and social condition.

The philosophy behind these extravagant propositions, a cheerfully brazen muddle of internationalist Marxism, Romantic humanism and techno-utopianism, might best be summed up as a kind of media theology. Working with extremely broad brushstrokes, Balázs portrayed film technology as the endpoint of an eschatological narrative stretching back to humanity’s primordial origins. The story goes something like this: At some unspecified point in the prehistoric past, before the development of verbal language, human communication had been based exclusively upon a repertoire of gesture and bodily expression that Balázs considered “the mother tongue of mankind.”[[291]](#footnote-291) This mode of communication was spontaneous, immediate and complete in itself, furnishing the means for transmitting whatever information had to be shared between one person and another within a presumably relatively simple and localised social structure. It was not a language, if by language we mean a system of arbitrary signifiers consensually related to an array of signified concepts. “[T]he man of visual culture,” Balázs wrote, “is not like a deaf mute who replaces words with sign language. His gestures do not signify concepts at all, but are the direct expression of his own non-rational self, and whatever is expressed in his face and movements arises from a stratum of the soul that can never be brought to the light of day by words. Here, the body becomes unmediated spirit, spirit rendered visible, wordless.”[[292]](#footnote-292) He believed that gesture and bodily expression constituted direct, soul-to-soul communication, or in the Derridean sense, a transcendental discourse of “pure intelligibility”, disclosing an “absolute logos” capable of calling a halt to the play of *différance* and bringing us into the presence of the absolute.[[293]](#footnote-293) Through this putative “visible” discourse, people were able to share both everyday information and their innermost spiritual impulses without the risk of misunderstanding inevitably bound up in any conventional language system.

There is another way we could put this. Before the development of verbal language, Balázs suggests, the whole of the human body expressed as face. Face, here, is understood as the paradigm of this form of immediate expressivity. When we look at a face and are struck by its expression, whether smiling, frowning or contorted with anguish, we do not interpret this expression as we would a road sign or some other symbolic representation. Rather, we intuitively recognise it as an integral physiological component of the emotional state in question. A smile does not “represent” happiness; it *is* happiness. The relationship is not conventional (or “conceptual”, to use Balázs’ term), but essential. Moreover, our response to this expressive display is not in the first instance intellectual, but affective. We feel it before we understand it. The fact is thus the paradigm of this pre-reflective, non-rational mode of communication, a property which, Balázs believed, once extended to the whole of the human body. The face that we are frequently misled or otherwise mistaken in our assessments of the emotional states of others did not strike Balázs as substantial objection to this position, firstly, because the possibility of deceitful expression presupposes the trustworthiness of the face in the first instance, and second, because even when an individual sets out to present a false face to us, there is always, he believed, some detail of their face which will betray their true intentions, no matter how skilfully they dissemble.

This pre-verbal age of total bodily expressivity was, so far as Balázs was concerned, an Edenic state. In a so-called “visual culture”, the divinity of the Human – which is to say, its ontological privilege as the sole animal capable of creating and accessing meaning, is present in its every movement, in every aspect of its visible form. The essence of each individual speaks itself continually to all others. Before the taint of language and abstract thought, to attempt to formulate the Human as a category, whether metaphysical or anthropological, would have been redundant, tautologous. “Man” simply was. Under these circumstances, human beings could not but coalesce into a universal brotherhood, founded on the self-evident transparency of its transcendental soul. The “Visible Man”, in Balázs’ terms, is the one who is able to fully embody this prelapsarian condition in all aspects of his external being, and therefore (to paraphrase Balázs) to be Human with his entire body, “from top to toe.”[[294]](#footnote-294)

**Conceptual Culture**

Of course, for every Eden there must be a Fall. In Balázs’ system, this was conceptualised as a descent into language. It could be traced back as far as the primordial transition from expressive sound to regularised speech-patterns, whereupon “[the] immediately visible spirit was...transformed into a mediated audible spirit and much was lost in the process, as in all translation.” As soon as there exists a verbal language, Balázs believed, a plane of abstraction insinuates itself between the human individual and the phenomenal world. People learn to relate both to their surroundings and other individuals through generalised concepts rather than immediate sensory experience – the idea of grass as a set of generic properties, for instance, rather than its thick vegetal odour, its prickling coolness between the toes, its bold and crisp greenness. Once the conceptual virus has entered the human system, he argued, it begins to structure perception and thought in ways that are, at a subjective level, both implicit and ineluctable. As concepts increase their influence over the mind and the senses, the capacity to sense the innate expressivity of the human form begins to atrophy. What Balázs called “the veil of our traditional, abstract way of seeing,” (46) falls across the human body.[[295]](#footnote-295) At the same time, the more that its marvels go unappreciated, the more the eloquence of the body itself begins to fall into abeyance. “The soul has migrated into the word and become crystallised there,” Balázs wrote. “The body, however, has been stripped of soul and emptied.”[[296]](#footnote-296) (10)

The primal alienation of the human from its own body and senses provides the basis for “conceptual culture”, Balázs’ catch-all term for any way of being in the world and with other people that founds itself on abstract idealities, as opposed to the spontaneous felt experience of human communion. A sceptic might reasonably retort that “conceptual” thinking is a prerequisite for any society concerned with trade, record-keeping, the rule of law, philosophy, mathematics, or indeed any of the basic perks of civilization. Even the representational artworks that survive from the Palaeolithic era would seem to presuppose some capacity for abstract reflection. To the extent that Balázs considers such questions, his answers are extremely vague, but his presumption seems to be that in most antique and medieval societies, the conceptual existed in a state of proper subordination to the visual. He speaks vaguely of the “golden age…[when] artists were permitted to paint the human soul and spirit without being deemed ‘literary’, because soul and spirit were not tied to concepts but could utterly be made flesh…The soul that became body without mediation could be painted and sculpted in its primary manifestation.” This cultural equilibrium persisted more or less up until the fifteenth century, and more specifically, “the advent of printing,” whereupon “the word [became] the principal bridge joining human beings to one another.” [[297]](#footnote-297)

The new print technologies of the fifteenth century effectively industrialised the inherent abstracting tendency of language, sparking a cataclysmic cultural and spiritual transformation. Quoting Victor Hugo’s observation that “the printed book has taken over the role of medieval cathedrals and has become the repository of the spirit of the people,” Balázs further asserted that “[t]he printed word smashed the stone to smithereens and broke up the church into a thousand books. It is universally agreed that this change has radically altered the face of life in general. But the degree of change to which the face of the individual human being has been subject – his brow, his eyes, his mouth – has been largely overlooked.”[[298]](#footnote-298) Print culture replaced communal aesthetic experience based around the collective reception of concrete (or even transsubstantial) artefacts with isolated reflection on imaginary entities, establishing a further degree of separation between the human and sensory experience. It furthermore supplied a reproducible technological substrate in which abstract concepts could circulate, radically independent of the human body and the material world. Speech, at least, had to be coterminous with the presence of the subject. The intelligibility of writing, however, is predicated explicitly upon a “rupture in presence”, the absolute absence, not only of the sender, but “the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers” in general.[[299]](#footnote-299) The complete human self-presence which had characterised visual culture was shattered and absorbed by the dematerialised corpus of literature, lost in a Borgesian Library of Babel, in which a fugitive *logos* retreats endlessly into a confounding maze of signifiers. The face, in this context, becomes an ever more beleaguered remnant of a condition that is being systematically erased from the human lifeworld.

At this point, Balázs makes a perfunctory attempt to relate his ideas to the Marxist critique of capitalism. Whilst he remained always thoroughly committed to the political goals of the proletarian struggle, dialectical materialism typically seems to have occurred to him as a rueful and obligatory afterthought. Hence his somewhat crude suggestion that “Printing merely accelerated the process of ‘reification’…Just as in the minds of men the intrinsic *value* of objects has been displaced by their market *price*, so too people’s minds have gradually become estranged from the immediate existence of objects in general.”[[300]](#footnote-300) His analysis does however gain some purchase when he evokes the condition of the human body under industrial capitalism. Here, the articulation of an abstract, print-based culture may be usefully related to the implementation of the division of labour, which commits to the human body to ceaselessly perform a set of repetitious and mechanical movements totally alienated from the thing that is being produced, a trend which was accelerated during Balázs’ lifetime by the increasing prevalence of assembly line production and so-called scientific management. When he laments that “The expressive surface of our bodies has been reduced to just our face…Our face has now come to resemble a clumsy little semaphore of the soul, sticking up in the air and signalling as best it may. Sometimes, our hands help out a little, evoking the melancholy of mutilated limbs,” the imagination is inevitably directed, not only to the everyday maulings which occurred in mines and factories and on plantations, but also to the apocalyptic ravages of the First World War, in which Balázs served as a soldier. Indeed, the War represented a new frontier both in terms of the frequency and seriousness of facial injuries (inflicted by flames or shrapnel, or gunfire directed at a face which had momentarily exposed itself above the lip of a trench) and the methods of their treatment. Modern plastic surgery was born on the battlefields of Western Europe, seeking to give a “new face” to those irrevocably scarred by the conflict. Likewise, Balázs’ theory addressed a body that had been profaned, decomposed and, as he put it, “[degraded]…to the status of a biological organism” by an imperialist capitalism in relation to which “conceptual culture” served as a kind of intellectual accelerant.[[301]](#footnote-301)

**“The Unique, Shared Psyche of the White Man”**

The mission of cinema, then, was to restore the wholeness, the dignity, the inviolability of the human body. If it is true, as Agamben puts it, that “by the end of the nineteenth century, the Western bourgeoisie had definitely lost its gestures,” then Balázs believed that film would revitalize the innate meaningfulness of bodily movements and physical forms, thereby “[leading] images back to the homeland of gesture.”[[302]](#footnote-302) Crucially, it would also reveal the universal character of human expression, thereby promising “redemption from the curse of Babel.” “The screens of the world,” Balázs enthused, “are now starting to project the *first international language*, the language of gestures and facial expressions.” Whereas the primordial “visual culture” had presumably been restricted to relatively small hunter-gatherer communities, the international reach and industrial scale of cinema could, he believed, extend this principle to the entire globe.

Balázs’ vision of the utopia which would ensue under this universal visual culture is repulsive and absurd by equal measure. Since, he argued, “a film costs so much to produce that it can only make a profit if it has international distribution,” it followed that “the actors’ facial expressions must be comprehensible to the whole world.” He continued: “This sets strict limits to national characteristics…The gesture that decides the course and the meaning of the action must be comprehensible to the widest variety of peoples, since otherwise the film will not recoup its costs.” The consequence of this economic logic, he reasoned, would be the inevitable standardisation of cinema’s expressive repertoire, the creation of an internationally legible *lingua franca* of facial expressions, gestures, bodily types and so on. But what form would this standardised discourse take? He concludes:

The cinematograph is a machine that in its own way will create a living, concrete internationalism: *the unique, shared psyche of the white man*. We can go further. By suggesting a uniform ideal of beauty as the universal goal of selective breeding, the film will help to produce a uniform type of the white race. The variety of facial expressions and bodily gestures has drawn sharper frontiers between peoples than has any customs barrier, but these will gradually be eroded by film. And when man finally becomes visible, he will always be able to recognise himself, despite the gulf between widely differing languages.[[303]](#footnote-303)

For the sake of accuracy, it should be observed that Balázs would later row back from this explicitly white supremacist position. As Carter points out, when Balázs came to rewrite these passages for his valedictory *Theory of the Film* (1949), he substituted this “racist essentialism” for “a Marxist-inflected cultural determinism that sees cinematic internationalism as the product of film's penetration of international markets.”[[304]](#footnote-304) Bitterly chastened by the twenty-five harrowing years that separated *Theory of the Film* from *Visible Man*, and, as a Central European Jew, touched personally by the unspeakable violence wrought by racist ideology, he surely grasped the horrors implicit in such visions of ethno-utopia. And yet, notwithstanding his “relativist” turn, the shadow of totalitarianism haunts Balázs‘ approach to the face in cinema, and, as we shall soon see, cannot be erased by a simple change of terminology.

Balázs’ film theory was fundamentally shaped by his utopian fantasies. He set out with the standard modernist goal of justifying film as an autonomous artform by identifying the unique aesthetic qualities which distinguish it from all other artforms. The way that he approached this question, however, was thoroughly subordinate to his primary philosophical distinction between the visible on the one hand, and the conceptual or the readable on the other, as well as his notion of cinema’s destiny as an agent of cultural (and racial) purification. Hence his constant stress on the graphical, lyrical and organic aspects of film aesthetics, over its narrative, rhetorical or analytical properties. In *Visible Man*, far from predicting the coming hegemony of the talkie, he foresaw the imminence of a kind of absolute cinema which would do away with intertitles, dialogue and language altogether: “For the intertitles that films still have are insignificant; they are partly the ephemeral rudiments of as yet undeveloped forms and partly they bear a special meaning that does not set out to assist the visual expression.”[[305]](#footnote-305) Even after the development of the sound film, which he described as a “grave danger” of “catastrophic force”, he argued (in 1931’s *The Spirit of Film*) that dialogue should still to be kept to an absolute minimum, and that cinema ought rather to focus on what we might call the figurative, as opposed to the denotative, qualities of sound: “Everything that has something to say over and above human dialogue, everything that still speaks to us in the great conversation of life…From the roaring of the surf and the din of the factory, to the monotonous melody of autumn rain beating on darkened windowpanes.”[[306]](#footnote-306) It should be stressed that Balázs’ response to synchronised sound was not a descent into Norma Desmond-esque delusion; rather, he adjusted his theory so that sound remained in a proper place of subordination to the visual, as well as stressing those aspects of sound which were more in line with the affective, sensory aesthetics he so prized, as opposed to its conceptual properties. “[We] should not hear, or *only* hear, what we can already see,” he argued. “The acoustic dimension should not just reinforce the effect of natural reality…It should awaken ideas and associations in our minds that the silent image on its own might have failed to arouse. And it will do so by juxtaposing sound montage and image montage contrapuntally, like two melodies.”[[307]](#footnote-307)

**An Alternative Theory of the Apparatus**

Balázs’ dogmatism on this point reflects his commitment to what he saw as cinema’s utopian mission. Its destiny, after all, was to penetrate the “veil of our traditional abstract way of seeing” in order to reveal the hidden substrate of “visual” expression latent in all things. The point was not to produce a convincing simulation of everyday reality, but to present the visible world to us in such as way as to demonstrate the contingency, and indeed, the ideological saturation, of our supposedly “natural” perception. To this end, he proposed a kind of “apparatus theory”, albeit one diametrically opposed to the more famous iteration of this concept proposed by the Lacanian film theorists of the 1970s. This latter paradigm developed primarily from the writings of Jean-Louis Baudry and his followers. Baudry, writing after the establishment and globalisation of continuity editing, saw the cinematic apparatus (comprising the sum of the various technologies of cinematic production and exhibition) as a mechanism designed to reconcile the moving image to the imperialistic prerogatives of the “transcendental” bourgeois subject, a visual system which produces and organises a world for the mastery and consumption of a disembodied, all-seeing eye.[[308]](#footnote-308) The function of the apparatus was to naturalise a world-picture which had in fact been carefully constructed to serve to scopophilic pleasure of this recumbent, even somnolent viewer.

The apparatus envisioned by Balázs, along with several of his modernist contemporaries, was quite the reverse, emphasising the dissonance between cinematic representation and subjective perception. The French theorist/director Jean Epstein, in some ways Balázs’ closest theoretical counterpart, spoke of the “intelligence of the machine”, a kind of cinematic para-consciousness so radically independent of the liberal-bourgeois subjectivity of Baudry’s theory that it threatened to overturn even its most concrete certainties:

[W]e know that the cinematograph, on the contrary, marks its representation of the universe with its own qualities, with an originality that makes this representation not a reflection of a simple copy with conceptions, of an organic mentality-mother, but rather a system that is individualized differently, partly independently, which contains the incitements for a philosophy so far from common opinions, the doxa, that one should perhaps call it an anti-philosophy.[[309]](#footnote-309)

In its simplest form, this theory argues that cinema shows us the world as we could never otherwise have seen it, through the mediation of its technological apparatus. Malcolm Turvey has dubbed this theoretical tendency “revelationism”, but in his attempts to debunk the work of the early film theorists he misplaces the emphasis upon the notion that cinema somehow extends or sharpens ordinary vision, in the same way as a telescope or a magnifying glass.[[310]](#footnote-310) This is not at all the heart of the matter – the point is rather that cinema confronts subjective perception with a perceptual system which is both physically and structurally removed from it. The cinematic image that reaches the eye is already the object of another’s beholding, has already been processed by what Vivian Sobchack calls the „

“secondary intentionality” of the cinematic machine.[[311]](#footnote-311) It is, according to Epstein, in the breach between these two perceptual-subjective systems that the radical aesthetic and political work of cinema is accomplished.

We see versions of this belief throughout early film criticism – in Dziga Vertov’s “Kino-Eye”[[312]](#footnote-312), as well as the French impressionist concept of *photogénie[[313]](#footnote-313)* – but perhaps its most comprehensive theoretical formulation is Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “optical unconscious.” Benjamin wrote:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action…With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones…Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man…The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.[[314]](#footnote-314) (229-230)

Close-up, slow motion, camera movement – Benjamin, like Balázs and Epstein, focusses his attention on techniques which reveal a world other than that which appears to the naked eye. The point, though, is not so much that the camera exposes hidden structures which are beyond the physical limits of vision, but that by confronting us with a visual field whose organization departs so manifestly from our own, it forces us to reckon with the insight that our everyday perception is structurally dependent on occlusion, ignorance and blindness as much as attention and comprehension. It is in this sense that cinema can be said to oppose conscious perception with its “unconscious” other, thereby relativizing the former’s privileged relationship with the real. By disarticulating perception from the conscious individual, film opens up a space for an analysis of the structure of the visual, of what is seen, what passes unseen, and why. For Benjamin, this analysis must necessarily be political, bearing potentially explosive revolutionary consequences. As he put it, “Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and our furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling.”[[315]](#footnote-315)

In this respect, Benjamin’s ideal is perhaps something like the “city symphony” created by Walter Ruttmann in his *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927), or Vertov in *Man With A Movie Camera* (1929). These films turned their kino-eye outwards, to the urban spaces of the modern industrial city. Theorists like Balázs and Epstein, however, swivelled the camera, training it upon the face of the human itself, with no less revolutionary ambition. Benjamin believed that cinema could provide proletarian audiences with tools to critically analyse their own social reality. Balázs was convinced that film could restructure both perception and the human body, thereby ushering in a new age of global harmony.

**The Art of Facial Expression**

Balázs constructed his theory around one technique in particular, which he saw as the paradigmatic cinematic gesture: the close-up. “The close-up,” he wrote, “is the technical precondition for the art of facial expression and hence of the higher art of film in general. A face has to be brought really close to us and it must be isolated from any context that might distract our attention…it must be the lyrical essence of the entire drama.” [[316]](#footnote-316) By focussing our attention on a particular object extracted from its material context, and displaying it in a way that foregrounds its minute details and ephemeral expressive movements, he argued, the close-up shows us how to see beneath the surface of “conceptual” vision:

Close-ups are film's true terrain. With the close-up the new territory of a new art opens up. It bears the name: 'The little things of life'. But even the biggest things of life consist of these 'little things', individual details and single moments, while the larger contours are mainly the result of the insensitivity and sloppiness with which we ignore the little things and blur their outlines. The abstract picture of the big things of life arises mainly from our myopia.[[317]](#footnote-317)

The close-up had a further attraction – its intimate, one might even say inextricable, relation with the human face. It was here that cinema truly began the radical work of reawakening visual culture in the human body. By homing in on the face, the close-up forced the viewer to confront an essentially “visible” spectacle:

The play of expressions expresses feelings; in other words it is lyrical. It is a form of lyricism that is incomparably richer and full of nuance than literary works of whatever kind...[How] much more personal is the expression of a face than word that others too may use! And how much more concrete and unambiguous is physiognomy than concepts, which are always abstract and general![[318]](#footnote-318)

The close-up magnifies the face, so that this “play of expressions” is perceptible in an unprecedented level of detail; it also isolates the face, cutting it off both from its material context and the body. This isolation was crucial to Balázs, since it proved that the face was an immanently expressive whole, its meaning determined not by context but by its externalisation of an inner state. Hence, he argued:

[If] we see a face isolated and enlarged, we lose our awareness of space, or of the immediate surroundings. Even if this is a face we have just glimpsed in the midst of a crowd, we now find ourselves alone with it. We may be aware if the specific space within which the face exists, but we do not imagine it for ourselves. For the face acquires expression and meaning without the addition of an imagined spatial context.[[319]](#footnote-319)

As Deleuze, following Balázs, puts it, “the close-up, the close-up of the face, has nothing to do with a partial object.”[[320]](#footnote-320) The close-up does not cut the face away from the pro-filmic body of which it its notionally part so that it appears as an abject, dismembered part-object. On the contrary, by separating the face from the body, the close-up, Balázs maintains, shows us that the face is capable of producing meaning all on its own, without context. The reasoning behind this was as follows: although a close-up naturally has its place and its function within the syntagmatic sequence of the montage or editing, it is nonetheless apart from the spatio-temporal continuity which that sequence strives to establish. By bringing the pro-filmic object (i.e. the face) into proximity with the lens, the close-up attenuates depth of field, effectively crushing the dimensions of the shot between the two. What emerges, then, is not the illusion of space, but the screen as a kind of sensible membrane. The close-up, Balázs argued, is the becoming-immediate of the cinematic image, the point at which it ceases to display a diegetic “world” and becomes a form of direct imagistic communication. Following this argument, Balázs was able to state that when D.W Griffith first shot his actors in close-up and cut them into his film-sequence, he “severed his characters' heads and spliced them one by one, full size, into scenes of human interaction...[This] did not simply bring the characters into close proximity within the same space; it removed them from the space altogether and transposed them into an entirely different dimension.”[[321]](#footnote-321)

Balázs also argued that the close-up of the face existed outside the linear temporality of the narrative film. To show this, he adapted a Bergsonian argument about musical melody. A melody is defined as the total sum of the relations between the constituent notes. These relations play out over a “duration”, but it is not true to say, according to Bergson, that they are distributed across a length of time. Rather, the melody is both the relation of each note to the whole and the sum of all these relations, a totality which is implied from the very first note. Their “relationship,” therefore “is not temporal. It exists in a different, spiritual dimension.” This quality of simultaneity likewise has a spatial implication:

The facial muscles that make the expression possible may be close to each other in space. But it is their relation to one another that creates expression. These relations have no extension and no direction in space. No more than do feelings and thoughts, ideas and associations. All these are image-like in nature and yet non-spatial.[[322]](#footnote-322)

The close-up, then, takes place outside the space and time of film in general, in a “spiritual” dimension. This smacks of idealism, but Balázs maintains his insistence that the face is never abstract, but remains at all times personal and particular, “concrete and unambiguous.” It is significant that Balázs uses the word “image-like”, because the face in close-up, according to this definition, cannot really be considered an image in any conventional sense. It is not a representation. It is neither iconic, indexical nor symbolic – it simply *is* in the instant of its appearance.

**Microphysiognomies**

In the previous chapter, we observed that photography splits the face between two opposing temporalities – on the one hand, the spatialized immobility of the photograph as object, and on the other, the concrete duration in which the photograph is made. This latter aspect of the face can appear in the photograph only as a negativity, alluding to those aspects of the subject which refuse to be accommodated to the photograph’s spatial configuration. What remains is a face whose properties are made to conform to the standards of objecthood – a set of spatial forms which by definition are at odds with the diachronous existence of the subject they purport to represent. In this sense, the photograph could be said to present the face as a predominantly conceptual or readable phenomenon, as opposed to a visible one, an abstracted, even informatic symbolization of an individual rather than a manifestation of their immediate being.

Film technology, Balázs suggests, offers a way to transcend this dichotomy. By restoring movement to the image, it puts the durational face back in the picture. Through the close-up, it presents the face in the context of a visual substrate that is “image-like in nature and yet non-spatial”, thereby allowing room for the emergence of the face in terms of its concrete duration. In so doing, it promises to alleviate the alienation of the human body from its sensual, non-rational meanings, ameliorating the division between conceptual and visual culture by relocating the former to its appropriate role as a secondary supplement to the latter. The mutilated corpus of modern humanity is restored to wholeness, miraculously enough, by a final act of division – the disarticulation of the head from the torso, and the extraction of the face from determining spatial context. These acts of removal prove Balázs’ most cherished hypothesis – that the human form is immanently meaningful, all on its own, without reference to external frames of significance.

What’s more, cinema made this transcendental experience one that was reproducible, transmissible, viewable *en masse* and at leisure. It thus presented a kind of vast pedagogical mechanism, a training apparatus, a factory for the production of human self-understanding. Balázs had a specific term for the kind of knowledge to which cinema provided access. It is a word we are already familiar with: “physiognomy.” “[E]verything external,” he proclaimed, “testifies to an internal reality” – the essence of the classic physiognomic credo.[[323]](#footnote-323) Nevertheless, Balázs’ application of the concept will certainly seem idiosyncratic in relation to Lavater, whose work the Hungarian is largely happy to ignore.[[324]](#footnote-324) Instead, Balázs’ main reference point is Lavater’s contemporary, correspondent and sometime collaborator, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe’s physiognomy was a more holistic and less reductive and deterministic iteration of the idea than Lavater’s, a distinction which eventually led to a breach between the two. In *Visible Man*, Balázs approvingly quotes a passage that demonstrates the substance of these disagreements, although ironically enough it originates from an essay written by Goethe as a contribution to Lavater’s *Physiognomical Fragments*:

What is the human exterior? Certainly not a man’s naked body or involuntary gestures that point to his inner energies and their actions!...The things surrounding a person, do not simply impinge on him; he also reacts to them, and, while letting himself be modified, he modifies his surroundings. A person’s clothes and belongings grant us reliable knowledge as to his character. Nature shapes man, he alters it, and this process of alteration is itself natural…[[325]](#footnote-325)

Goethe’s physiognomy did not present itself as a branch of anatomical science, but rather a kind of individualised anthropological observation, encompassing a much broader range of human characteristics and behaviour, extending even to possessions and clothing. It also viewed “nature” as a fluid dialectical process, rather than an immutable biological order. On the grounds that he identifies with the Goethean, instead of the Lavaterian tradition, Carter attempts to characterise Balázs’ physiognomy as “a mode of aesthetic as opposed to crudely empirical knowing: a mode in which cognition occurs within the context of a perpetual flux of aesthetic value and affect.”[[326]](#footnote-326)

This is true enough as far as it goes, but it hardly settles the issue. Indisputably there is more of becoming in Balázs’ philosophy than in Lavater’s. At both a material and an ontological level, Balázs was just as interested in emergence and transformation as is in revelation, and his ideal analytical object was not the skeletal lines of the silhouette, but the “play of facial expressions” – that plastic stream of expressive meaning that Lavater would have dismissed as “pathognomy.” These distinctions, however, did not necessarily result from differing attitudes to the status of physiognomic knowledge. It was not the case, for instance, that Lavater saw the results of his studies simply as a form of “empirical knowing”; on the contrary, he believed that with the full development and proper application of his method, physiognomy would become “no longer a science, but sensibility, a prompt and convincing inspection of the human heart.”[[327]](#footnote-327) The point of the method was not to do away with aesthetic perception, but to refine and correct it. By the same token, Balázs may well have believed that physiognomic meaning develops out of the “perpetual flux of aesthetic value and affect,” but he was still confident that one could draw perfectly “empirical” conclusions from it relating to the racial, class and moral characteristics of the individual in question. For instance, he proposed that film technology ought to be applied to what he considered to be “one of the most interesting and psychologically significant questions: how much is type and how much individuality, how much is race and how much the human personality?...these proportions are far more readily visible and comprehensible in human gestures and physiognomy than in words, however subtle.” “In this respect,” he concluded, “film has a mission that transcends the realm of art and can provide invaluable material for both anthropology and psychology.”[[328]](#footnote-328) The notion that it is possible, on the basis of bodily characteristics, to distinguish between personal and racial or typological traits, is paradigmatically physiognomic, no matter the exact nature of the semiotics at play.

Ultimately, both Balázs and Lavater were addressing a contradiction internal to the concept of physiognomic knowledge, and the philosophical distinctions between them emerge as much from the different means with which they attacked this problem as anything else. In our discussion of Lavater, we observed the antinomy between his desire to investigate the face as an empirical object, and his necessary resort to media forms which extracted the face from the contested space of quotidian experience within which its meanings are formed. In the following chapter, we saw how photography provided only a limited, albeit unprecedentedly powerful, solution to this dilemma. Balázs believed that film supplied the means to transcend this contradiction. Previous physiognomic projects had invariably sought their way out of this foundational difficulty by reducing the face to something straightforwardly readable; their failures would be overcome by reversing this imperative, and restoring the face to its native visibility. Through film, the face could be experienced and studied as a mobile, changeable, living thing, and yet one that was insulated from the problems of affective reciprocity and social propriety that so troubled Lavater. At the same time, the complex methodological contortions and laboured demonstrations of a Lavater or a Duchenne were replaced with a kind of subconscious visual training that reframed the acquisition of physiognomic knowledge as an entertainment.

Without a technology capable of reproducing the face “in itself”, classical physiognomy had been forced to depend on the fidelity and generalizability of sketches and paintings, or else dissolve the tangible corporeality of the face into tables of measurements and anatomical diagrams. Film clears all this away at a stroke, replacing a hermeneutic system with a simple mode of visuality, which Balázs argued was innate to the human sensorium once it has been freed from the shackles of “conceptual” seeing:

Everything that men see has a familiar visage; this is an inevitable form of our perception. As we cannot sense things outside space and time, so we cannot see them without physiognomy. Every shape makes a mostly unconscious emotional impression on us which may be pleasant or unpleasant, alarming or reassuring, because it reminds us, however distantly, of some human face, which we ourselves project into it. Our anthropomorphous world-vision makes us see a human physiognomy in every phenomenon.[[329]](#footnote-329)

The qualities, types and values, which Balázs discovered in the human face are thereby thoroughly naturalised. Beauty, race, class – these ideas are rendered essential the moment that they are discovered in a face. This rhetoric is by no means contradicted by Balázs' interest in narrative film, since he considered film acting at its highest to be far more a matter of *being* than pretending: “In film what determines character from the very first moment on is his or her *appearance*. The director's task is not to find a 'performer', but the character itself.”[[330]](#footnote-330) The stars he most fervently admired – Asta Nielsen, Pola Negri, Sessue Hayakawa – were those who he felt were able to articulate an essential “appearance” through and in contrast to an array of assumed expressions or “masks”. In such performances, film-acting became a kind of Dance of the Seven Veils, leading towards the revelation of a “deeper face”,[[331]](#footnote-331) the “face *beneath the play of expressions.*” This deeper face was the object of what he called “microphysiognomy”, the most intense form of cinematic revelation. What it uncovered was the ultimate grounding of the meanings of the face in the individual essence:

This underlying face cannot be manufactured. We have it from the outset; it has always been there and is inescapable. It may be frequently obscured by our conscious expressions. But the close-up brings it to light. It is not the face we wear, but our actual visual appearance that is decisive. For all of us appear in the end just as we are. Just as the most horrendous avalanche consists of small grains of sand in motion, so too even the expression is created in the barely perceptible movements of the tiniest parts of the face. This microphysiognomy is the direct making visible of micropsychology. Overt expression, in contrast, relates to conscious feelings and conceptual thought.[[332]](#footnote-332)

The close-up of the face, then, represents for Balázs a kind of preparatory gesture, a laying of the grounds for the absolutely becoming-visible of the human, a state in which all of the qualities or properties of the human are externalised in the (sur)face of the body, or to put it another way, in which ideological categories are reified as essential states which are “viewed” (not read) in the flesh of the human creature. Biological essentialism – specifically, the notion that ideas of race and class identity can be traced to a system of concrete facial or bodily signs – is therefore hardwired into the theory, a totalitarian rot sunk deep into the heart of Balázs’ utopianism.

**Béla Forgets the Scissors**

One of the theoretical corollaries of Balázs’ obsession with the close-up was that he saw the camera – its position, orientation and motion – as the foundation of the filmic art. This put him at odds with those critics and filmmakers for whom editing, or as it was often called at the time, “montage”, comprised the essence of the cinematic. Carter records that in a 1926 lecture, Balázs declared the cinematographer to be “the alpha and omega of film.”[[333]](#footnote-333) This comment raised the ire of the legendary Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, who replied with an article whose title accused Balázs of “forgetting the scissors.” Balázs, Eisenstein argued, fetishized the signifying power of the isolated shot over the syntagmatic effect of the editing sequence, an attitude which reflected in turn an uninterrogated residue of bourgeois individualism, or as Eisenstein put it, “starism.” [[334]](#footnote-334) This disagreement runs deep. Balázs’ theory presented a fundamentally organicist approach to film, one which foregrounded the affective phenomenology of the cinematic experience to an extent that repressed not only the editor’s scissors, but the mechanical nature of cinema *tout court*. The deprecation of editing plays down the extent to which cinematic vision is always pre-structured by a kind of “conceptual”, mechanical logic, one that is based on the sequential relationships between images, not on their immediate contents. At the same time, to Balázs the gaze of the camera seems to possess a kind of transcendental purity, as if it could not of itself be recruited to any pre-existing ideological scheme.

It is useful at this point to contrast Balázs with his contemporary Jean Epstein, a figure with whom, as we have already observed, he shared many characteristcs. Like Balázs, Epstein was entranced and enraptured by the close-up of the human face, a fascination which he described with incendiary brio in a passage from his *Bonjour Cinema* (1921):

I will never find the way to say how I love American close-ups. Point blank. A head suddenly appears on screen and drama, now face to face, seems to address me personally and swells with an extraordinary intensity. I am hypnotized. Now the tragedy is anatomical. The decor of the fifth act is this corner of a cheek torn by a smile. Waiting for the moment when 1,000 meters of intrigue converge in a muscular denouement satisfies me more than the rest of the film. Muscular preambles ripple beneath the skin. Shadows shift, tremble, hesitate. Something is being decided. A breeze of emotion underlines the mouth with clouds. The orography of the face vacillates. Seismic shocks begin. Capillary wrinkles try to split the fault. A wave carries them away. Crescendo. A muscle bridles. The lip is laced with tics like a theater curtain. Everything is movement, imbalance, crisis. Crack. The mouth gives way, like a ripe fruit splitting open. As if slit by a scalpel, a keyboard-like smile cuts laterally into the corner of the lips.[[335]](#footnote-335)

There are sections in Balázs which reach towards this state of intoxicated derangement, but the violent body-horror of this remarkable paragraph is Epstein’s alone. The face in Balázs always seems to possess a kind of sacred dignity, which it is the responsibility of film to display as intimately and emphatically as possible, but also never to profane it with too fervent a touch. Epstein’s face is a monstrous mess, riven with contradictions, a hybrid of the sublime and the grotesque. It should be acknowledged that Epstein is writing largely in a metaphorical register. The “American close-up” to which this paean is dedicated was typically a relatively naturalistic phenomenon (Epstein’s main reference point here most likely being the narrative works of D.W. Griffith), whereas what he describes, if visualised literally, would be more like a sequence from Buñuel’s *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). And yet there is a sense in which Epstein anticipates such works of surrealist cinema, and that is in the emphasis he places on the meaning-making power of the cut – the scalpel that both splits and sutures at a single stroke. Simultaneously destructive and constructive, the cut violates the face’s material integrity by splicing it together with other kinds of image, and in so doing opens it up to a range of different meanings, a wild significatory range that Epstein evokes through a savage mixing of imagistic registers – 1,000 meters of film reel, a flickering shadow-play, a pattern in a cloud-bank, the scrunched wrinkles of a relief map, an orchestral crescendo, the flourish of a theatre curtain, a spoiled parody of a still-life, the keyboard of a piano or a typewriter. In this truly “new face”, immediate affective communication (the “muscular preambles” and “lip laced with tics”) is blended inextricably and non-hierarchically with lines of syntagmatic code (the film strip, the relief map, the keyboard), utterly collapsing the visible/conceptual distinction upon which Balazs’ film-physiognomy is based. In this account, cinema is not the apotheosis of physiognomy, but its Armageddon.

Epstein's discourse makes viscerally explicit that factor which Balázs works ultimately to repress – the formative role of the apparatus in constituting the “new face” of the cinematic close-up. Whilst Balázs speaks of “technical precondition” and the creativity of both the camera and the montage, his theory of the close-up ultimately requires that the cinematic apparatus perform the role of a vanishing mediator, serving simply to remove the scales from our eyes so that we can commune with a “visible” face which is, after all, natural and primordial. For Epstein, however, film technology is directly productive of the faces it displays:

The touch of amperes inscribes thoughts on the forehead. The arc-light bears the shadow of memories into the eye that it frames, pins to the star's gaze a strength of will, and blows, like God, onto the clay of mouths so that even the saddest feelings of love might appear as a smile. But if the arc-light should blink, farewell to profound perspectives of feeling.[[336]](#footnote-336)

The lighting array serves here as a synecdoche for the operation of the cinematic apparatus as a whole (which, after all, is essentially a photographic machine and as such a form of “light-writing”). The image emphasises the extent to which the camera does not simply reveal the face, but both shapes and animates it, like God breathing life into clay. This is not to simplistically reverse Balázs’ organicism by stating that the filmic face is a purely mechanical artefact. Rather, it is just to insist that the mechanism is inextricably a part of it, bound up in its forms and meanings, and that therefore to expunge the “conceptual” from the cine-face might not be as straightforward as he suggests. Indeed, it may well be that, far from being the imposed residue of an overly rationalized and materialistic culture, this mechanistic element is in fact a fundamental constituent of the face on film. From the very earliest moment, the way that the cinematic face was produced and exhibited suggests the inextricability of the visible and the readable.

**Reading the Body**

The cinematic faces of the 1920s which inspired Balázs' theory did not emerge *sui generis*; rather they are the product of a genealogy which stretches back to the very technological origins of the medium. The question of precisely when and where we find the first close-up of the face is both theoretically and historically problematic, but a viable candidate emerges in the work of Georges Demenÿ, laboratory assistant to the physiologist and photographic pioneer Étienne-Jules Marey. In 1891, Demenÿ received a commission from the National Deaf Mute Association to come up with a device which would help deaf mutes learn to lip read, and thereby perhaps to talk, by enabling them to study the movements of the speaking face. The next year he patented a device which he called the Phonoscope, a proto-cinematic projector which created a moving image by passing a beam of light through a rotating glass disc. The photographic stills were pasted around the edge of these discs, meaning that the length of the film was limited by the discs' circumference, which was a mere 132 centimetres.[[337]](#footnote-337) The first images he projected were films of himself, shot from the chest up, pronouncing the phrases “*Je t’aime*” and “*Vive la France*!”.

The still images which Demenÿ used to create these “animated portraits”, as he called them, were generated using the “chronophotographic” method devised by his mentor, Marey. Marey's chronophotography was (along with the motion studies of the Anglo-American photographer Eadweard Muybridge) one of the first projects to produce a photographic apparatus capable of capturing movement by breaking it down into a series of still images. For instance, Marey’s first camera, his “Chronophotograhpic Gun” (it resembled a kind of inverted tommy-gun, with the magazine stuck on top of the barrel rather than underneath), shot at a rate of twelve frames a second, recording each successive image onto a single exposure, expressing the particular movement in question as a series of static postures distributed across a continuous space. He shot birds taking flight, gymnasts performing their exercises and perhaps most famously a female nude descending a staircase, later to serve as the model for the painting by Duchamp. What appeared to the naked eye as an indivisible fluid motion was broken down by chronophotography into a succession of discrete figures whose physiological structure could be studied both independently, and as they related to one another. Effectively, Marey's project furnished the principle of the film-strip, the sequence of still images which can then be reanimated to provide a moving picture.

The aim of chronophotography was to render the body “readable”, in precisely the sense defined in our earlier discussion of Balázs. Marey hoped to reduce the moving body as far as possible to a graphic representation of phyisiological processes and anatomical structures. As John Douard has shown, he went to great lengths in the design of his apparatus to minimize the “contingent...irrelevant” details captured by the camera, which is to say, those details which were not immediately readable in terms of his mechanistic theory of physical movement. For instance, for some images he dressed his subjects entirely in black (including their head and face), and affixed a network of white buttons and metal strips to their limbs, thereby abstracting physical movement from the body even in the very instant that it performed it.[[338]](#footnote-338)

To this extent, Marey's work is functionally implicated in the very process which Balázs decries – the reduction of the expressive human body to a “biological organism.” And yet, the technology which reveals Visible Man is unthinkable without Marey's innovations. This impulse to render the body “readable” by means of an analytic deconstruction was a fundamental part of what Tom Gunning has called “the gnostic mission of early film.” This concept names a tendency in both the technology and culture of early film which “saw film not only as a new art form or a new language, but as a new instrument of knowledge”, and the cinematic apparatus as “a new instrument of the visible which had a revelatory mission,” and asserts a continuity between early cinematic entertainments and the scientific experiments of photographic pioneers such as Albert Londe, Duchenne du Boulogne and indeed Marey himself. This “gnostic” or analytic impulse remains “dialectically interrelated” with the desire to delight and amuse as part of the formative process of early film entertainment.[[339]](#footnote-339)

Demenÿ’s work is a perfect instance of this dialectic. His goal, in the first instance, was to render the face “readable” – to present it, not as an expressive image but as a stereotypical representation of the physical mechanisms of speech. His first move was to apply Marey's chronophotography to the face. However, even this initial step represented a fundamental departure from the methods of his mentor. In Marey’s chronophotography, the camera is the passive witness of a body which performs itself in an essentially theatrical staging, the structure of the shot conforming to the dimensions of the pro-filmic. For Demenÿ’s purposes, however, it was necessary to capture the brief, subtle movements of the speaking face. He moved the camera closer, shooting himself from the chest-up. This simple act is one of the first authentically cinematographic gestures – a kind of protozoic form of the cinematic close-up. No longer the passive recipient of pro-filmic staging, the camera actively intervenes in the structure of the object it records, severing the head and shoulders from the rest of the body and identifying this zone as the privileged site of the analytic gaze. A further layer of analysis is added to Marey's method, not only breaking the moving body down into a succession of static poses, but also dismembering its physical form so that one particular element (the face) might emerge more clearly as a “readable” object.

**Viewing the Face**

By moving his camera in close to capture a moving image of the face, Demenÿ established two important principles with regard to the relationship between the face and the foundational technologies of early film. Firstly, he defined the cinematographic gesture – the gesture which performs the essentially cinematic, which shows us what only the cinema can show us – as a movement which *closes in* on the body, and specifically the face, in order to reveal its expressive details. Secondly, he defined this movement as one which seeks to expose the face to knowledge by detaching it from the body, by breaking it down, and penetrating beneath the visible surface, in order to make it “readable”. We can see this movement as one of “deterritorialization”, as Deleuze and Guattari would put it, in which an object is divorced from the material relations within which it used to assume significance and reinstalled on a plane of abstraction, whereupon it attains a whole range of possible new meanings. Lifted out of the messy contingency of context and embodiment, the face is able to emerge in itself as an object of the analytic gaze. Furthermore, it is detached both from the presence of the physical being and the persistent identity with which it was once associated – we are not interested in this face as a “window to the soul” or even a marker of individual particularity, but as the exemplar of a stereotypical physiological process. The becoming-“readable” of the face, then, depends upon the attenuation of some of its usual properties as part of an analytic procedure.

At the same time, however, Demenÿ’s work instantly subverts this analytic tendency by placing the need to *recompose* movement at the very heart of its project. As Gunning points out:

[S]ince the aim was not only analytical but synthetic – helping deaf mutes to imitate the processes of speech as well as observe them – devising a means of presenting these photographs in such a manner as to reconstitute their motion became a primary issue in a way it not been for Marey's earlier motion studies.[[340]](#footnote-340)

The analytic impulse effectively terminates with the decomposition of movement into a series of still poses, as in Marey’s chronophotography.[[341]](#footnote-341) But in order for Demenÿ’s instrument to be fit for purpose, it needed not only to break the face down, but to put it back together again. This introduced an imperative of a different order, “synthetic”, rather than analytic, as Gunning observes, seeking not merely to break the face down into knowable units, but also to recombine these fragments in order to reproduce its vital movement. A dialectic is thereby established within cinematic technology itself, between an instrument which seeks to perform a deconstructive analysis of the image of the moving face, and an instrument which seeks to reproduce the image of the moving face from the results of that analysis. In an 1894 letter to the Lumière brothers, Demenÿ would describe his apparatus precisely as a fusion of these two functions:

I have constructed models of simplified cameras in which the workings are easy and sure enough to be put into the hands of an amateur; that is, they can be removed from a laboratory. These instruments are of two kinds: a photographic series camera giving one to twenty images per second, successive or interrupted series. The second camera is what I have named the phonoscope. It is the synthetic machine, inseparable from the first. It has several applications; it allows the viewing of glass positives with complete detail or the enlargement by projection of the images of movement. The latter application offers the greatest interest from the point of view of the living portrait that I inaugurated.[[342]](#footnote-342)

By this point Demenÿ had discovered that this dialectic between his proto-cinematic apparatus as an analytic tool on the one hand, and a synthetic machine on the other, yielded a further conflict: between cinema as a popular entertainment, and cinema as a tool of knowledge. When he presented the phonoscope to the *Exposition Internationale de Photographie de Paris* in 1892, the interest it generated went far beyond its potential as a pedagogical tool. It was clear, it seemed, that the phonoscope was marketable as a source of pleasure and amusement, and indeed, in the wake of this publicity Demenÿ was approached by several carnival showmen, offering as much as a hundred francs a day to rent the phonoscope as a sideshow attraction.[[343]](#footnote-343) By combining Marey’s analytic instrument with a synthetic machine designed to reproduce motion, Demenÿ had stumbled upon the possibility of cinema as a source of pleasure and amusement, and he immediately determined to exploit any commercial possibilities which this discovery might offer. As Braun notes, his most cherished notion was that the phonoscope would become a staple of the bourgeois family home as a projector of “animated portraits”; he even imagined his contraption combined with the Edison phonograph to create a picture which not only moved, but spoke as well.

Demenÿ’s attempts to exploit his invention commercially were ultimately ill-fated, with the limited length of the films and the difficulty of mass-producing the glass plates proving two fundamental barriers to success. Nonetheless, his work was instrumental in establishing the nature of the relationship between the technologies of early cinema and the human face. What he discovered was that the presentation of the face as a moving image added a different kind of appeal to the experience, an immediate, sensory or affective response which we could quite comfortably categorise, in Balázs' terms, as “visible.” The relationship between the face and the cinematic apparatus, then, is composed of *both* of these imperatives – on the one hand, to render the face “readable” as an object of knowledge, and on the other to offer it up as a spectacle of “visible” pleasure and affective enjoyment.

This is precisely the dynamic which we see carried forward into what Gunning has called the “cinema of attractions”, the carnivalesque model of cinematic production, exhibition and spectatorship which prevailed before the industrial and formal standardisation of narrative film. These “attractions” were short, often comprising just a single shot capturing a comic escapade, such as a gardener being sprayed by his own hose (Louis Lumière’s “The Sprinkler Sprinkled” (1895)), or a grotesque spectacle, such as an elephant being executed by electric shock (Edison’s “Electrocuting an Elephant (1903)). As Gunning explains, the point of these films was not to tell a story, but to pique, and then to satisfy the audience’s curiosity:

Attractions’ fundamental hold on spectators depends on arousing and satisfying visual curiosity through a direct and acknowledged act of display, rather than following a narrative enigma within a diegetic site into which the spectator peers invisibly. Rather than a desire for an (almost) endlessly delayed fulfilment and a cognitive involvement in pursuing an enigma, early cinema…arouses a curiosity that is satisfied by surprise rather than narrative suspense.[[344]](#footnote-344)

This curiosity, according to Gunning, amalgamates two distinct impulses derived from the Augustinian notion of *curiositas*, which denotes simultaneously a desire for knowledge and a sinful scopophilic pleasure in the unusual, the grotesque and the obscene. In other words, it combines a need to render its object legible or “readable” with a proclivity for a more immediate form of visual stimulation. The face was the ideal site of this ambivalent appeal, providing simultaneously a marvellous demonstration of cinema's potential to produce the “optical unconscious” as a legible object and to provide a comical or bizarre visual spectacle.

We see this, for instance, in the early Edison Kinetoscope recording *Fred Ott's Sneeze* (1894), a mere five seconds of footage showing us exactly what the title proposes and nothing more.[[345]](#footnote-345) Ott is filmed from the chest up against a black background, isolated from any determinate environment so that all there is for us to observe are the motions of his hands, the convulsion of his neck and the contortions of his face as he goes through with the sneeze. Like Demenÿ’s Phonoscopic faces, it performs an analytic isolation of the face from its material context in order to present a stereotypical physiological action. At the same time, however, the fascination of the film proceeds equally from the transgressive pleasure of being able to experience this everyday action with a grotesque proximity which would otherwise be both socially inappropriate and physically unpleasant (the screen functioning here as a kind of sanitary splash-guard). The overall effect of the film, therefore, is the product of a tension between a deconstruction of the sneezing face into a “readable” physiological motion and its immediate, affective shock-value as a “visible” spectacle. *Fred Ott's Sneeze* offers a minimal representation of the formal dynamics of the close-up of the face in early cinema. The close-up brings the face into proximity with the audience, and isolates it from context, presenting it as a self-contained object whose effect emerges out of the tension between the “readable” and the “visible” image.

**The Big Swallow**

We spoke above of the close-up of the face as one of the earliest definitively cinematic acts, marking the point at which film technology begins to actively configure the structure of that which it represents. Likewise, one way to conceptualise the transition from the simple pleasures of a *Fred Ott’s Sneeze* towards the feature-length narrative films which would start to emerge throughout the 1910s is as a journey into and through the human face. The more that film aspired to communicate complex narratives with characters whose emotional experiences were integral to the drama, the more the facial close-up would inevitably emerge as an object of the most intense ambivalence. On the one hand, it was an indispensable element of cinema’s ability to affect its audience, creating moments of direct emotional address by moving the action into the durational “anti-space” described so powerfully by Balázs. By the same token, however, it carried an irreducible potential for disruption, always threatening to create instants of such profound lyrical intensity that they might derail spatial and narrative continuity altogether. The close-up of the face emblematised the most compelling possibilities of cinema as an art-form – its capacity to articulate the deep convolutional relatedness of space, time and affect, to investigate interpersonal relationships at the level of perception, to address subjective, collective and political experiences from an otherwise unimaginable perspective of simultaneity. At the same time, it also represented the constant danger that all of these potentialities might collapse into the kind of ecstatic, insensible dissolution that lurks perpetually in the margins of an Epstein or a Balázs.

What is remarkable to note is how early on in the story of cinema’s development that the power of these antinomies was first sensed. In 1901, the Scottish film pioneer James Williamson (a member of the Brighton School, an informal collective of British filmmakers still operating predominantly in the framework of the cinema of attractions) produced a short entitled “The Big Swallow.”[[346]](#footnote-346) It is roughly one minute long. Against a plain white background, we see a stiff looking man (music hall comedian Sam Dalton) wearing a broad-brimmed hat and an extremely well starched collar. Immediately, the camera starts tracking towards him. He notices its approach, and begins to gesticulate, shaking his head and brandishing his cane. Evidently he is reluctant to be filmed; he seems to find the camera’s proximity an intrusion (but of course, we cannot really fathom the source of his discomfort). The camera is undeterred, however. It continues to advance, sliding as it does up his body and towards his face. His gestures become more violent and wild; he shakes his fist, his (silent) mouth gaping so wide and flapping so fast that one can scarcely associate the movements with a meaningful language. It is notable, however, that in his excitement he actually takes a couple of steps *towards* the camera, as if to confront it. Very rapidly the distance between them closes until only the face remains within the frame, but before we can even begin to grasp it as a whole the camera advances further still, cutting out the eyes and noise. We can see the roots of a moustache stippling the top lip. Then the mouth opens before us, impenetrably dark, and the shot seems to hover for an instant on the edge, before the throat lurches forward and the screen goes black. Almost immediately we see the image of a cameraman, tearing off his hood in panic as he watches his instrument pitch forward and tumble down into the abyss. Seconds later he follows, swallowed headfirst so that we see his legs and feet kicking absurdly as he is sucked down below. Then the frame begins to recede; we see lips smacking together, a protruding tongue, and then a whole face performing a pantomime of gustatory contentment. Just as the film ends, the man’s expression breaks into a manic look of glee, which is snatched away from us even in the instant that it appears.

“The Big Swallow” stages the close-up of the face as a fascinating danger, both for the human being and for cinema itself. The camera homes in on the face as a putative object of fulfilment, as that which will allow it to realize its innate formal potential (and perhaps in this context, to transcend its status as a fairground attraction). Each frame opens up a new vista, into which the camera is drawn, exposing a new face that is then immediately abolished by the compulsion to move further and deeper – until cinema eats itself. From the perspective of the swallower, meanwhile, the film’s conclusion represents a pyrrhic victory. There is a disturbing automaticity in how quickly reluctance and resistance are transformed into a gluttonous readiness to consume; his valedictory satisfaction, meanwhile, is played with a definite air of hubris. After all, what triumph could be more complete than for the cinematic apparatus to be absorbed willingly, even joyfully, into the human body? From a technical perspective, perhaps the film’s most notable accomplishment is a pair of masked cuts that hide the shift from the tracking close-up of Dalton to the shot of the cameraman disappearing into his “throat” and back again. These concealed transitions enact the covert cyborg union of body and apparatus, quietly hinting at the constructive, mechanical gesture that lies behind the presentation of the putatively “organic” cinematic face. In “The Big Swallow”, the face emerges as the site of an array of immanent conflicts, between the desire for an affective totality that speaks all on its own without context or framing, and an expressive unit that is absolutely subordinated to the syntagmatic power of the apparatus, between concept and immediacy, or even, to return to Balázs’ terms, between the visible and the readable.

This theme was subsequently taken up and elaborated in the work of Georges Méliès, whose innumerable fantastical shorts, produced between the years of 1896 and 1912, are one of the most important bridges between the cinema of attractions and the feature film. Most famously, a face serves as the destination for a fantastical journey in both *A Trip to the Moon* (1902)[[347]](#footnote-347) and *The Impossible Voyage* (1904),[[348]](#footnote-348) two films in which a cabal of eccentric intellectuals make an ill-advised, near-calamitous, but ultimately triumphant journey to the surface of an astral body (the Moon and the Sun respectively). Méliès’ films are generally characterised by the use of a static camera and two-dimensional theatrical staging, with almost all the action taking place along the vertical or horizontal axis. The shots in which the Moon and Sun make their respective appearances are notable exceptions to this format. In both instances, the astral body emerges initially as a remote object in a broad expanse of sky, before moving gradually closer to the camera until it fills the screen, revealing the anthropomorphised face that sits at its core. In other words, it is the face which introduces to Méliès’ art that grandest of all illusions: the third dimension, through which film technology transcends the limitations of theatrical staging and enters the space of the authentically cinematic.

This pair of films frame the human face as the object of a promethean ambition – a source of fascination, and even of great power, but also a mortal danger. Both films present the cinematic exposure of the face as an act of penetration. In *A Trip to the Moon*, the bullet-shaped rocket plunges obscenely into the Moon’s eye, whilst the train-cum-dirigible of *The Impossible Voyage* plummets into the solar gullet in a manner acutely reminiscent of *The Big Swallow*. After touchdown, both parties are favoured with wondrous sights – jagged mountains and crystalline forests of fire, sparkling lunar snowfalls, mushroom-filled grottoes – but equally, they are eventually grateful to escape with their lives. The “Incoherent Geographers” of *The Impossible Voyage* are blasted back from the sun in a submarine, whilst the astronauts of *A Trip to the Moon* are forced to flee the wrath of vengeful natives after committing a semi-accidental act of regicide. Once again, the face is subject to powerfully conflicting forces of attraction and repulsion, figured simultaneously as the goal towards which the cinematic must strive and the threat against which it must be defended.

This general motif, in which faces are associated with mysterious journeys, altered states of consciousness and technomantic experiments, is repeated and varied throughout to Méliès’ oeuvre. There are cases of giant faces appearing in dreams, as in *The Alchemist’s Hallucination* (1897) or *The Dream of an Opium Fiend* (1908), in which the moon slugs back a tankard of beer. Then there are the several instances of magicians and scientists who in one way or another find themselves involved with severed heads, such as *The Four Troublesome Heads* (1898), *The Triple Conjurer and the Living Head* (1900), and *Tit for Tat, or, A Good Joke on My Head* (1904). Perhaps the most notable of all of these, though, is 1901’s *The Man with the Rubber Head*, in which an ingenious chemist (played by Méliès himself) produces a living replica of his own head which he then, apparently for no further reason than his own edification, proceeds to pump up with a pair of bellows.[[349]](#footnote-349) Just like the Moon or the Sun in the two “voyage” films, the head swells exponentially until it fills the centre of the screen. The head seems to enjoy its newfound stature, and sets about experimenting with a charming repertoire of mugs, gurns, winks and boggles, all finely embellished by Méliès’ utterly magnificent moustache. The chemist does not want to push his luck, however, so he quickly deflates the head before calling in his assistant to admire his handiwork. The assistant, apparently employed more for his enthusiasm than his wits, takes his turn at the bellows, whereupon he proceeds to pump the head with heedless abandon, until it explodes in a puff of smoke. This all appears to take quite a traumatic toll on the chemist, who kicks his assistant out of the laboratory so that he may grieve in peace.

*The Man with the Rubber Head* is the inverse of the trips to Moon and Sun. Here, the face is not the endpoint of a fantastical voyage to the fringes of human reality, but the dilation of the human body through the use of a mechanical apparatus. We do not see a movement towards the face, as it were, but instead the face expanding towards the camera. Nonetheless, the forces at play are the same. The close-up of the face is accomplished through a combination of scopohilic desire and the application of a technology so modern that it seems almost paranormal; at the same time, this process is constantly beset by an anxiety that the drive to realise the face in close-up may be pushed too far, and that the tensions innate to the constitution of the face on screen may eventually tear it apart.

**Visible and Readable Faces**

The antinomies that were expressed in the faces of early film were carried through into the era of the silent feature. In fact, if anything, the tensions acting upon the face became progressively more intense, as it was forced to shoulder an increasing burden in terms of both the quantity of affective energy and narrative information it was supposed to communicate. Meanwhile, the increased sophistication of film technique and film theory leads to an increasingly refined manifestation of the tendencies towards readability and visibility respectively. This is clearly legible in the contrast between the American narrative film, emblematised by the work of D.W. Griffith, and the Soviet film as articulated in the theory and practice of figures such as Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov.

As we have suggested, there was inarguably a certain dislocation between the theory and practice of the face in silent cinema. It is nonetheless possible to provide concrete instantiations, even if they are, as Aumont suggests, “difficult” and “fleeting”.[[350]](#footnote-350) Both the ambivalent position of the face in 1920s cinema, and the practical viability of the Balázsian position, are very well illustrated by a famous scene from D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919). In this sequence, the film’s heroine Lucy (Lillian Gish) locks herself in a closet in an attempt to escape the wrath of her abusive father, alcoholic boxer Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp). Possessed by drunken rage, Burrows takes up an axe, and starts smashing down the door (the scene is an obvious inspiration for the “Here’s Johnny!” sequence in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980)). We cut from Burrows to a cross section of the inside of the closet, where we see Lucy in a state of paroxysmal fear, alternately cowering and raving, shuffling round and round on the spot as if with one final revolution she might find herself supernaturally transported to safety. Then we cut again, to a medium-close shot of Lucy’s head and upper body. In this confined space, the force of her terror cannot pass out of her frail body, but remains concentrated within, overcharging her movements with an electric tension which seems ready to rip her apart at any moment. Her eyes roll in their sockets, her mouth gapes.

Just as the intensity of Lucy’s suffering seems to be building to an unbearable pitch, Griffith cuts again, now presenting us with an extreme close-up of Lucy’s face. Her expression does not flow smoothly across the cut, but jars dissonantly with the previous shot as her head lurches violently towards us, tossing from side to side then swaying on the brink of unconsciousness. Lucy’s face passes through an indescribable repertoire of contortions, features blurring beyond distinction into an image of pure panic. Her mouth spreads wide into what must be an ear-splitting scream. Griffith cuts back to the cross-section, and Lucy turning on the spot, her face almost totally hollowed by the dilation of her mouth and eyes as she begins to take leave of herself.

What is exemplary about this sequence is the tension between the film's attempt, on the one hand, to create and sustain a sense of claustrophobia through its portrayal of space, and on the other, to home in on Gish's face as a privileged site of expressivity. The use of cross-section, with roughly half of the shot showing the inside of the closet and half solid wall, establishes the latter as a confined, stifling space, an impression which is exaggerated by Gish's frantic movements. The first cut disturbs this effect, firstly by shifting the camera to a seemingly “impossible” position either “in” the wall or looking “through” the door that Burrows is supposedly demolishing, secondly by forcing Gish to halt her movements so that she is facing directly towards the camera. The cut, moreover, does not match on action – in the first shot Gish is wheeling demented on the spot, in the second, she has suddenly stopped, and faces towards the camera. The second cut (also, as we have noted, unmatched) accentuates this by moving into close-up, jerking the camera into an even more unrealistic position and obliterating both the background and the depth of the space within the closet. The counterintuitive effect is that the more intimately we perceive Lucy's torment from her facial expressions, the more we seem to depart from the concrete situation that produces it. In short, every effect which seeks to ground the film in a particular spatial and temporal continuity is sacrificed to this shot, in which the face us offered up to us as the object of our fear, our awe and our empathy. What we witness, therefore, is a conflict between a emergent tendency towards expressing meaning through the elaboration of a realistic space on the one hand, and an older tendency on the other, which prioritises the need to get the camera as close as possible to Gish’s face, to show that face without obscurity or distraction, over the attempt to establish a coherent, continuous spatiality.

It is in the context of such a scene that Balázs' dictum that “the face acquires expression and meaning without the addition of an imagined spatial context” begins to gain some purchase on the concrete practice of silent cinema. He continues: “The abyss into which a figure peers no doubt *explains* his expression of terror, it does not *create* it. The expression exists even without the explanation. It is not turned into an expression by the addition of an imagined situation.”[[351]](#footnote-351) The meaning of the face is immanent, “visible” – it illuminates the context supplied by the rest of the diegesis, not the other way around. It is a totalizing, homogenizing figure, aiming to express, in Deleuze’s terms, a “pure Quality” which is supposed to organise the affective tenor of the rest of the scene – in this case, mortal terror.[[352]](#footnote-352)

The function of the face in the Soviet film is quite the opposite. Eisenstein was critical of both Balázs and Griffith, accusing the former of “forgetting the scissors”, which is to say, fetishizing the signifiying power of the individual shot over the montage-structure.[[353]](#footnote-353) He credited Griffith with being the first to “*intelligently utilize*”[[354]](#footnote-354) the close-up for artistic purposes, rather than as a trick novelty, but nonetheless criticised his use of the technique as being dualistic, naively naturalistic, and ultimately expressive of a philosophically impoverished bourgeois worldview. The paradigmatic isolation of the face in the Griffith/Balázs close-up effectively figured the qualities that they portrayed as organic essences, rather than, as historical materialism would have it, the product of conflict and struggle.[[355]](#footnote-355) The close-up, Eisenstein believed, was essentially an analytical, rather than a representational device, a distinction he illustrated by dwelling on the different nomenclature used to designate the close-shot in English and Russian:

This distinction in principle beings with an essence that exists in the term itself.

We say: an object or face is photographed in “large scale,” i.e., *large*.

The American says: *near*, or “close-up.”

We are speaking of the *qualitative* side of the phenomenon, linked with its meaning (just as we speak of a *large* talent, that is of one which stands out, by its significance, from the general line…).

Among Americans the term is attached to *viewpoint*.

Among us – to *the value of what is seen*.[[356]](#footnote-356)

The Soviet close-up is concerned with value and meaning within a broader filmic (and dialectical) system. Eisenstein could hardly have been more explicit when he said, “...the principal function of the close-up in our cinema is – not only and not so much to *show* or to *present*, as to *signify*, to give *meaning*,to *designate*” – the point of the close-up is to create an image that is “readable” as opposed to “visible”. Working on the fundamental “1+1=3” principle of montage theory, Eisenstein's close-up functioned as part of the syntagmatic sequence of the editing in order to “create *a new quality of the whole from a juxtaposition of the separate parts*.”[[357]](#footnote-357) The face in Eisenstein, then, frequently comes juxtaposed with another image to create a compound meaning. Very often this is used to illustrate the moral qualities of a particular class (faces are seldom personalized in Eisenstein, particularly in his historical films) – it is remarkable, for example, the extent to which *October* depends upon faces to provide a kind of affective or spiritual index of the various interest groups its action depicts. The braying, moustachioed visages of the Provisional Government are cut together with an Orthodox priest swinging a burning censer, illustrating not just their complicity in hoodwinking the Russian people but the smoky insubstantiality of the stories they peddle. Soldiers are shown smiling and laughing as they share food and listen to an incendiary speech; later, when the mutinous 1st Machine-Gun regiment are disarmed, arrested and paraded before the scornful bourgeoisie we again see laughing faces, the expressions remarkably similar, but this time the signification is quite different. The face, according to the Soviet montage theory, is not a self-contained expressive object, but a sign like any other, to be manipulated and reshaped by the “scissors” of the film-editor.

This belief has its roots in a famous and, so far as we know, at least semi-apocryphal “experiment” conducted by Lev Kuleshov, the *éminence grise* of montage theory. His aim was to demonstrate the primacy of editing over the internal structure of the shot in cinematic meaning-making; his method, to take a series of copies of the same facial close-up of the actor Mozhukin, and to sequentially juxtapose them with a range of shots showing, variously “a plate of soup, a girl, a child's coffin, etc.” He presented this sequence to an audience, and asked them to describe what expression was showing on Mozhukin's face in each successive close-up. His findings were as follows:

When juxtaposed by montage, the shots acquired different meanings. The emotions of the man on the screen became different. Two shots gave rise to a new notion, a new image that neither of them contained: a different third. I was stunned. I saw the great power of montage. Here was the pivot, the essential basis of any film! At the director’s will montage infused a different meaning into the content. That was my conclusion.[[358]](#footnote-358)

In itself, of course, Mozhukin's expression had not changed at all, retaining the exactly the same impassive aspect in every shot. What had happened, Kuleshov reasoned, was that that the affective tenor of each successive cut-away had inscribed its meaning upon his face. The conclusion to be drawn was that, in cinema at least, the face had little or no capacity at all to determine its own meanings. Quite the reverse, in fact; if it is remarkable for anything, it is for its plasticity, its receptiveness to inscribed meaning and its capacity for seamless integration within larger semantic systems. Kuleshov's face, then, is *entirely* “readable”, to precisely the same extent that Balázs' is purely “visible”.

In 1992, the critics Prince and Hensley recreated the Kuleshov experiment, as faithfully as they were able, one of the chief problems being that the only surviving records of it are anecdotal, and frequently contradictory at that. Their findings, safe to say, did not support the conventional account:

In every condition, the majority of viewers said there was no emotion being displayed…while somewhat smaller proportions of viewers report “no emotion” in the edited sequences than do when seeing the face alone, the differences are not large enough to be statistically meaningful….Those viewers who reported seeing emotions did not tend to pick the expected emotion (e.g., happiness for the child). For the majority in each condition…the editing made no apparent difference. In their eyes, the actor’s face remained emotionless.[[359]](#footnote-359)

Aside from identifying a host of methodological problems with the experiment as it is generally recounted, Prince and Hensley concluded that “associational cues” and “linkages internal to the shots” have an important role in determining readings of emotional states, and that Kuleshov's desire to assert that the face's expression is not internally determined was mandated by his ideological need to establish the semantic primacy of montage over the individual shot. But for our purposes, the significance of the Kuleshov experiment is not so much that it describes the actual functioning of the face within a film sequence but that it exposes the extreme limit of the theory of the “readable face”. And here, Prince and Hensley's analysis is illuminating again, as they accuse Kuleshov of a kind of cinematic Taylorism in which the face is stripped of all intrinsic value, the better to be inserted seamlessly into a mechanistic meaning-making apparatus:

By all received accounts, the Mozhukin sequence proceeds like an assembly line efficiently producing meaning. As in the analogy of cinema and language, each shot performs almost like a word, combining with others to form a larger concept or phrase. Mozhukin's ambiguous or expressionless face followed by a close-up of a bowl of soup produce for the viewer the meaning that he is hungry...Like an assembly line, the production process of the montage is both sequential and predetermined. The viewer’s interpretations follow an orderly pattern and fall neatly into place, cued by each shot combination.[[360]](#footnote-360)

We should resist the temptation to portray these two approaches to the face on film as a pair of opposite but equal totalitarianisms. On the one hand, the cinema of Eisenstein ought to be viewed in the character of an avant-garde experiment that expresses, to a certain degree, particular tendencies and contradictions inherent to a political ideology, rather than a straightforward expression of that ideology *in toto*. Insofar as its antagonist, the “American-style” close-up, has had a greater share of defining the post-WW2 cinematic mainstream, the Soviet-style close-up has the disadvantage of appearing to represent an “experimental” and therefore fringe technique. However, as I’ve hoped to show, the mechanistic or “conceptual” tendency that the Eisensteinian face manifest represents a quality that is inherent to all film faces, however repressed or pronounced, whilst also representing an essential aesthetic and ethical corrective to the account of the face we find in Balázs. As for the “visible face”, I would argue in conclusion that it is not in itself representative of any concrete political ideology *per se*, but it is nevertheless amenable to any programme which seeks to found itself on the hypostatisation of essentialised identities. In this sense, it serves as the possible basis of a system in the name of which terrible violence may be prosecuted – a subject which will be covered in detail in the following chapter.

It would be no more than a glib statement of the obvious to point out that the meanings of a face can never be either wholly intrinsic or wholly syntagmatic, but arise only out of the interplay between these two factors, and the notion of a “third way” between that of Balázs and Eisenstein is surely as dead an end in the cinematic arena as it is in the political. The value of returning to these first few decades of the face on film should be measured from our own contemporary standpoint, in which regard a re-estrangement of the filmic face is a bracing, vitalising experience. A figure like Balázs shakes us out of a century of accrued familiarity, reawakening us to the stakes implicit in every cinematic countenance – a realization that is equal parts exhilarating and horrifying. And if there is a prescription for us to take from our investigations, perhaps it is that the proper rejoinder to the domesticated, post-Swansonian face to which we have become accustomed is neither in the visible nor the readable, but the point beyond and beneath them both – the dark side of the moon, the heart of the sun, at which all inscription is swallowed into nothingness.

**Chapter Four: Face of Our Time**

The adept of human beings seizes the alien psyche by comprehending it. That is power, superiority of the person who comprehends over the person who is comprehended.

Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*

**The Odd Couple**

In 1931 Béla Bálazs, by that point the screenwriter of a series of successful pictures for the German cinema, was approached by a young director for help with the scripting of her first film. It was a labour of love, to be made with a small crew and without studio finance. According to John Ralmon’s account of the production, the director part-funded the project by mortgaging her home, making up with remainder with a loan from the film’s producer (and her erstwhile fiancé) Harry R. Sokal. Bálazs would agree to defer his salary, as would cinematographer (and the director’s current affianced) Hans Schneeberger.[[361]](#footnote-361)

The picture was to be in the style of the so-called "mountain film", a genre popularised in Weimar Germany by the works of Arnold Fanck. As Eric Rentschler explains in his book on Nazi cinema, these movies were “filmed on location against majestic peaks,” and tended to feature rugged Teutonic beefcakes locked in mortal struggle with landscape and weather, “vigorous athletes confronting untamed elements…viewing themselves as souls in touch with a mightier destiny, the call of the mountains.”[[362]](#footnote-362) These lofty themes were typically leavened with a slab of romantic melodrama, a formula that Kracauer dubbed “half-monumental, half-sentimental.”[[363]](#footnote-363) The young director was herself a veteran of this school of filmmaking, having starred in Fanck's *The Holy Mountain* (1926), *The Great Leap* (1927), *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (co-directed with G.W. Pabst, 1929), *Storm over Mont Blanc* (1930) and *The White Ecstasy* (1931). The new film was to be entitled *The Blue Light*; the name of the director was Leni Riefenstahl.[[364]](#footnote-364)

It is scarcely necessary to observe that Bálazs, the Jewish Marxist revolutionary exile, and Riefenstahl, soon-to-be the doyenne of Nazi cinema, make one of the oddest couples in the history of film. Nonetheless, their working relationship was supposedly harmonious. Riefenstahl, albeit in her transparently self-serving and mendacious reflections after the fact, claimed “[it] was an ideal cooperation, and we had a wonderful and good relationship.”[[365]](#footnote-365) This relationship extended beyond the limits of scriptwriting. When problems arose with filming Bálazs travelled from Berlin to the Dolomites in order to help direct the scenes in which Riefenstahl herself (also the star of the movie) was performing. Ralmon goes as far as to claim that at this point, Riefenstahl was possessed of “liberal views” that were by no means contradictory with Bálazs' leftist politics, and that “the months of close contact with Bálazs – who was an eloquent proselytizer of the Marxist cause – further radicalized her *Weltanschauung*.”[[366]](#footnote-366)

Whether or not we believe this to be the case, the bald facts remain. In September 1931, before Riefenstahl had even begun editing the film, Bálazs, sensing which way the wind was blowing, accepted an invitation to emigrate to the USSR. He would not return to Central Europe until 1945. Meanwhile, *The Blue Light* was released in 1932 to international acclaim, winning the silver medal at the inaugural Venice Film Festival. Its reception in Germany was more mixed, although it reputedly struck a chord with one particularly lucrative demographic – Rentschler reports how, upon meeting Riefenstahl following the film's release, Adolf Hitler told her, “Once we come to power, you must make my films.”[[367]](#footnote-367) When *The Blue Light* was reissued in 1938 following the success of *Olimpia*, Riefenstahl’s film about the Berlin Olympics, Bálazs' name was excised from the credits, along with his fellow Jews Sokal and Carl Mayer, who also contributed to the script. Bálazs was never paid for his work; when he contacted Riefenstahl about the matter, she left the issue of “the claims of the Jew Béla Bálazs on me” in the hands of her attorney, who happened to be none other than Julius Streicher, publisher of virulently antisemitic propaganda rag *Der Stürmer*.[[368]](#footnote-368) The two “great friends” would never meet again.

The film's afterlife has been just as tangled and contentious as its production history. Riefenstahl and her apologists have seized on *The Blue Light* as proof that the director of *Triumph of the Will* and *Olimpia* was, at heart, an artistic naif caught up in the infernal machinery of the Nazi culture industry. On the other hand, critics like Rentschler, Kracauer and Susan Sontag have all convincingly pointed to the film's exuberantly proto-fascist aesthetics – its celebration of, in Rentschler's words, “fulsome antirationalism, blind enthusiasm, and overwrought pathos”, as well as its embodiment of such cherished Nazi myths as the sanctified bond between blood and soil, and the hypostatization of race as the determining principle of identity, communal life and human worth.[[369]](#footnote-369) In this context, Bálazs' involvement in the film is grotesquely ironic. How is it that the former Director of Literature in the Hungarian Proletarian Republic, the artistic director of the Berlin Worker's Theatrical Association, the friend and comrade of Georg Luckás, no less, could be party to a film which seems so clearly implicated in the cultural project of German Fascism?

This is a question to be answered at the level of theory, not biography. *The Blue Light* represents the most significant and enduring intersection between Bálazs' critical project, and the material conditions of film production in 1930s Germany; by extension, it speaks to the relationship between his thought and contemporary social, cultural and political life more generally. As we recall, Bálazs' theory was never meant solely to provide a description of the formal qualities of a new artistic mode, but also to conceptualise cinema as a technology which would help transform both the social and physiological organisation of the human creature. *The Blue Light* provides a unique opportunity to take these latter claims at face value, to examine the possible connections between Bálazs' radical aesthetics of the face on the screen, and a new political force which seeks to use modern visual technologies to segregate and organise bodies into a hegemonic order – that is to say, Fascism. In the broadest sense, *The Blue Light* will provide a context in which to elaborate a model of just how cinematic technology has in practice been employed as part of an attempt, in the words of Bálazs, to “give the human being a new face.”

**The Return of Physiognomy**

First of all, to give Bálazs his due, it is necessary to situate his ideas about the human face within their native cultural context. We will recall that he began his first treatise of film theory, 1924’s *Visible Man*, with the declaration that the human face had been rendered “illegible” – a striking and perplexing statement to be sure.[[370]](#footnote-370) As it happens, however, the notion that the face of modern man had somehow become obscure or unreadable was at that time by no means an original or even uncommon idea. In fact, Bálazs’ is just one of a quite remarkable array of similar contemporary lamentations. We could, for instance, look back to 1910, when the protagonists of Rainer Maria Rilke’s novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* bemoaned the “worn out” and “stretched” mien of the faces of modern city-dwellers:

There are people who wear the same face for years on end; naturally it shows signs of wear, it gets dirty, it cracks at the creases…Other people are disconcertingly quick to change their faces, one after another, and they wear them out…They are not used to looking after their faces; the last is worn out in a week, holed and paper-thin in numerous places, and little by little the underlay shows though, the non-faces, and they go about wearing that.[[371]](#footnote-371)

Rilke evokes a sense of exhaustion connected with the repetitive rigours of urban living. In 1929’s *The Adventurous Heart*, Ernst Jünger chose to emphasize the homogeneity that this kind of existence engendered:

We will observe that the face of the modern city dweller bears a double hallmark: fear and dreams…The extraordinary sameness and typicality of the expression betrays the inexorability of the process and the decisive factor they all share; these large habitats are preserved like hothouses of glass that admit no air.[[372]](#footnote-372)

These thoughts were echoed the very same year by the novelist and physician Alfred Döblin, best known for *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Writing in the introduction to August Sander’s *Face of our Time*, a collection of photographs which purported to show a cross-section of contemporary German society, he proclaimed that:

We are now talking about the astonishing levelling out of faces and images by human society, by class distinctions, by the cultural attainments of each class. This is the second kind of standardizing or assimilating anonymity.[[373]](#footnote-373)

(The first kind of “standardizing” or assimilation, incidentally, is death.) Finally, for the purposes of this demonstration at least, we could cite the words of the journalist Axel Eggebrecht, who in 1931 colourfully described a “chaos of faces…the pulp of mouths and cheeks” and “the painful awareness that all originality, all individuality is withering away.”[[374]](#footnote-374)

The years 1918 to 1945 in Germany are marked, amongst other things, by a strange and pervasive obsession with faces, with endless discourses upon the face and experiments in its proper representation, characterized above all by the anxiety that the human countenance had somehow ceased to perform its cardinal functions. To the many other social, economic and political crises experienced by those unfortunate enough to live through these years, we can now add one further – a cultural crisis of faciality, centring on the fundamental questions of what faces are and how they can mean. As we shall see, this crisis touched virtually every sphere of German intellectual life, profoundly influenced some of its most important cultural tendencies, and would, post-1933, become one of the determining contexts of official Nazi government policy. But this is getting ahead of ourselves. In the 1920s and early 30s, the crisis of faciality could just as easily be proclaimed by a utopian communist (Bálazs), an arch-conservative (Jünger) or a bourgeois liberal (Döblin). It crossed ideological and disciplinary boundaries with remarkable ease.

One of the most peculiar features of the crisis of faciality was the revival within German culture of physiognomy, that ancient para-science which has consistently haunted our narrative throughout the preceding chapters. German-speaking intellectual culture had long had a special affinity with physiognomic ideas, going at least as far back as the publication of Lavater’s *Physiognomic Fragments* in 1775. The remarkable popularity of Lavaterian physigonomy, particularly around the end of the eighteenth century, did not however mean that its propositions went uncontested. Even in its heyday it was the subject of fierce disputation, most prominently in the scathing polemics of Lavater’s *bête noire*, the philosopher Georg Lichtenberg. Hegel likewise published a powerful debunking of the theory (along with the associated practice of phrenology) in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807). There is a general sense that in the wake of these critiques, physiognomy fell out of favour as both a popular and an intellectual pursuit. Gray records an observation to this effect by Immanuel Kant, who as early as 1798 was able to remark that physiognomy was “no longer in demand, and nothing has remained of it.”[[375]](#footnote-375)

However, the notion that physiognomy was done away with in the early nineteenth-century can leave us with something of a false picture. It may have been that the Lavaterian discourse fell out of favour, but the basic physiognomic contention – that the external features of the body and face reveal the essential characteristics of the individual or group – was taken up wholesale by the extremely influential eugenicist, criminological and racial-scientific movements which developed in the second half of the century. Figures like Galton and Lombroso may have burnished their scientific *bona fides* by avoiding the melodramatic rhetoric of Lavaterian physiognomy, but this does not mean that their work did not reproduce his assumptions. As observed in Chapter One, physiognomy is a hardy weed, capable of weathering long periods of cultural dormancy, and extremely adept at infiltrating other intellectual paradigms. It is not as if, upon the signing of the Versailles Treaty, the citizens and scholars of Germany all spontaneously took to alchemy or the reading of entrails. Physiognomy “returned” to the philosophical and artistic discourses of Weimar Germany as a set of language and ideas whose terrain had been prepared in advance.

Nevertheless, the nonlinear and frequently subterranean nature of physiognomy’s persistence means that its doctrines rarely have the appearance of historical continuity or consistency. Hence it is possible to characterise its sudden prevalence in the public discourse of post-First World War Germany as the “unexpected recurrence” of an “antiquated” idea.[[376]](#footnote-376) In her essay on the visual culture of interwar Germany, Leesa Rittelmann notes a newspaper article of the 4th September 1930, in which the journalist Franz Evers expressed his surprise that this so recently unfashionable trend had resurged to cultural prominence:

Twenty years ago one would have smiled, if one spoke of physiognomy or of determining one’s inner worth, character, type of predisposition and professional abilities etc. based entirely upon an assessment of their external bodily features…Today the illustrated newspapers are full of physiognomic pictures and physiognomic betrayals.[[377]](#footnote-377)

Over the dead bodies of Lichtenberg, Kant and Hegel, physiognomy was back, and the weird atavism of this development was matched only by the manic energy with which it was adopted by artists, thinkers and official functionaries all across the political, professional and disciplinary matrix.

In *Male Fantasies*, his monumental study of the social and psychological origins of German fascism, Klaus Theweleit invites us to consider its genesis as a crisis of bodily coherence. In his analysis of fascist and proto-fascist writings, including the memoirs, diaries and letters of *Freikorps* and NSDAP members, he notes the consistent prevalence of a lexicon of fluidity – “Floods, morasses, mire, slime, pulp” – used to characterise the forces, both internal and external, which threaten the “erect, soldierly” body of the ideal German male.[[378]](#footnote-378) From within, there is weakness and vulnerability, illicit sexual desire and all the abject exigencies of embodiment – oozing runnels of semen, blood, shit, saliva and tears, which seep through the cracks in the body’s exterior, threatening to subsume its hard outer surface. From without, there are the avatars of difference, the woman, the communist and the Jew, massed energies which wash towards him in a tide, threatening to overflow and engulf him. Theweleit ventriloquises this neurotic state in the following remarkable passage:

If that stream reaches me, touches me, spills over me, then I will dissolve, sink, explode with nausea, disintegrate in fear, turn horrified into slime that will gum me up…I’ll be in a state where everything is the same, inextricably mixed together, and no one will be able to tell what it is that’s flowing down there…Who’s going to pull me out of this?...I’m about to explode![[379]](#footnote-379)

These anxieties are the psychic manifestations of national crises (and vice versa) – the burden of post-war shame and guilt, a sense of powerlessness and submission, the quite literal fear of dismemberment on the part of a polity which, after all, had existed in its current form for less than fifty years.

The fascist impulse responds to these threats by attempting to consolidate what Theweleit calls “body-armour” – a rigid external carapace which seeks to guarantee the coherence of the national and individual corpus against the forces of disintegration. “The most urgent task of the man of steel,” Theweleit writes, “is to pursue, to dam in, and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back into the horribly disorganized jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines, and feelings that calls itself human.”[[380]](#footnote-380) This reaction yields an iconography that is already prevalent in First World War propaganda, and would later be absorbed into the image-vocabulary of the White Terror, the *Freikorps* and the NSDAP – the “man of steel”, with ice-blue eyes and blonde hair, gaze set unflinchingly to the heavens, his body comprised of hard geometries from head to toe, set firm against fluidity and dissolution. The ideal of the soldier-male is exported from the battlefield to become a general social ideal, in Ernst Jünger’s words, “a whole new race, energy incarnate, charged with supreme energy. Supple bodies, lean and sinewy, striking features, stony eyes petrified in a thousand terrors beneath their helmets.”[[381]](#footnote-381)

The inverse of this figure can be found in the artworks of the New Objectivity, particularly figures such as Otto Dix, Max Beckmann and George Grosz, whose caricatures frequently present the degeneracy of early Weimar elites as a kind of facial collapse, their paintings depicting panoramas of sloping brows that subside into swollen, drooping noses and lips fixed in peevish grimaces, or else bulging out from around the mouth like strips of mouldering veal. The critics Hake and Rittelmann both suggest that these images share a basic physiognomic logic with the reactionary iconographies they seek to critique, in that they posit a meaningful relationship between moral and physical degradation. This may or may not be a fair assessment of the New Objectivist tendency; what is interesting for our purposes is the way that their works visualise precisely the kind of neurosis that Theweleit describes as one of the roots of the fascist impulse – a fixation with the destructuring of face and body and the collapse of legible forms into a gross and undifferentiated morass of flesh. Dix, Beckmann et al exhibit a kind of grim revelry in these spectacles of physical dissolution, satisfied that, in their paintings at least, the corrupt bourgeoisie has been given a face to match its soul.

Conversely, there were many artists who pursued the opposite impulse, attempting to reaffirm the corporeality of their nation by discovering the “true face” of the German people. Nowhere was this imperative more clearly manifested than in the phenomenon of the photobook. A photobook is a simple enough object, no more than a volume of photographs arranged around a particular theme with minimal textual accompaniment, but the genre was remarkably popular in interwar Germany. According to Rittelmann, “nearly one thousand German photobooks [were] published between 1918 and 1933.”[[382]](#footnote-382) Some of these focussed on landscapes or famous historical sites, but a great proportion of them consisted of portraits of the human body and face, featuring either celebrated personages (of course, Hitler became a favourite subject) or a purported cross-section of German society, bearing a title like *Everyday Heads*, *German People*, and *Face of the German People*. The most famous of these collections were assembled by auteurs such as August Sander, Helmar Lerski and Erna Lendvai-Dircksen – facial prospectors who trawled through Eggebrecht’s “pulp of mouths and cheeks” in search of a defining characteristic or a recognisable form. The photobook, above all else, is perhaps the defining symptom of the crisis of faciality. It directly enacts the desire to arrest the social and political disarray of the Weimar years by reconstituting society into a visible hierarchy based upon clear and unambiguous somatic criteria – solid ground in the midst of the all-consuming flood.

**Academic Physiognomy**

The prevalence of physiognomic tropes within popular visual culture was, however, only half of the story. Perhaps even stranger and more remarkable was the flourishing of physiognomic ideas and language in intellectual and academic contexts. In 1918, the historian Oswald Spengler published the first volume of his hugely influential work *The Decline of the West*, which proposed what he claimed to be a radically new form of historiography based on “physiognomic principles.” The telling of history, as he saw it, should not be a merely “mechanical” recounting of dates, names, events and facts, but the exercise of an intuitive and instantaneous judgement which extracts the essence (and therefore the historical destiny) of a particular Culture from its “morphological” characteristics – codes of behaviour, habits of dress, styles of architecture, in short, any object or practice that could be read as the “expression” of the soul of the culture in which it was practiced. “The visible foregrounds of history,” he wrote, “have the same significance as the outward phenomena of the individual man…The body and all its elaborations…are an expression of the soul. But henceforth “knowledge of men implies also knowledge of those superlative human organisms that I call Cultures, and of their mien, their speech, their acts – these terms being meant as we mean them already in the case of the individual.”[[383]](#footnote-383) Lavater once foretold that a fully articulated physiognomic theory would be a “science of sciences”, a kind of meta-hermeneutics capable of interpreting and ordering all forms of knowledge. Spengler likewise prophesied that “In a hundred years all sciences that are sill possible on this soil will be parts of a single vast Physiognomic of all things human.”[[384]](#footnote-384) For Spengler, as for Lavater before him, physiognomic discourse functioned as a kind of meta-hermeneutics, capable of interpreting, subordinating and ordering all other forms of knowledge.

In the wake of Spengler, the next two decades saw a virulent pervasion of “physiognomic” projects across a quite astonishing range of disciplines. Gray’s *About Face* documents thes motley figures with admirable exhaustiveness. In the field of psychology, there was the work of Ludwig Klages, who believed his field and physiognomy to be “identical in their deep structure.”[[385]](#footnote-385) In metaphysics, Rudolf Kassner, author of such works as *Number and Face* (1919) and *The Physiognomic Worldview* (1930), proposed a system of “universal physiognomics” which extended the discipline beyond the human body to the entire phenomenal world. The psychiatrist Ernst Kretschmer tied physiognomic body types to predispositions for certain mental illnesses.”[[386]](#footnote-386) In the burgeoning field of racial science, the infamous Hans F.K. Günther, the so-called “Race-Pope” of Nazi ideology, explicitly couched his theories in physiognomic language. Meanwhile, his colleague and sometime adversary Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss, a former student of Husserl, attempted to create a system which synthesised physiognomic racial science with the methods of phenomenology. And as Gray demonstrates, these luminaries were only the tip of the iceberg.[[387]](#footnote-387) Physiognomic thinking pervaded virtually every sphere of German intellectual life. Small wonder that in 1931 the philosopher Karl Jaspers felt compelled to take up the pen against it, in the tradition of Lichtenberg and Hegel, in his *The Intellectual Situation of the Contemporary Age*. But if the tide was not already decisively against him by that point, it certainly would be by 1933, when the physiognomic principle that an individual’s external appearance provides immediate proof of their racial provenance and their moral worth was enshrined as part of official Nazi ideology.

In the most general sense, the academic physiognomy which remerged in post-war Germany was a continuation of the Europe-wide discourse of “degeneration” which had pervaded the second half of the eighteenth century. Characterised by Roger Griffin as the sense that Western civilization “while progressing economically and technologically in ever more spectacular fashion, was actually…sinking ever more deeply into a process of spiritual decline and moral bankruptcy,”[[388]](#footnote-388) this movement combined diatribes against the erosion of religious faith, morality, sexual mores and rigid social hierarchies with post-Darwinian fears of the genetic enfeeblement of the “white race.” Writers such as the Comte de Gobineau, whose *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1855) was one of the founding texts of scientific racism, warned against miscegenation and the dilution of superior genetic stock, whilst the physician and social critic Max Nordau fulminated against the dual evils of urbanization and decadent art in *The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization* (1883) and *Degeneration* (1892).

Griffin argues that there were two main strains of this discourse at play in early twentieth-century Europe – on the one hand, a fatalistic cultural pessimism “in which decline and entropy are seen as ineluctable,” epitomised by the chthonic murmurings of the Romanian essayist E.M Cioran, and on the other, “a palingenetic variety which envisages the possibility that civilization can pull out of its nose-dive towards destruction just in time for it to assume a cyclic shape imbued with the “telos” of rebirth and renewed life.”[[389]](#footnote-389) The new physiognomy was emphatically of this second type, positing itself as a technology of cultural renewal capable of reversing the catastrophic course of Western civilization.

**Physiognomic Vision**

Physiognomy begins its analysis of the present by applying a system of binaries, which remain remarkably consistent across a range of different writers. Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* revolves around the opposition between the “systematic” and the “physiognomic”, for Béla Bálazs it is the “conceptual” and the “visual”, for Rudolf Kassner “number” and “face”, and so on. On the side of physiognomy, we find experience, intuition, sensation, affect, soul, spirit, vision, culture and the body. On the other side, which is to say, that of the present crisis, we find rationality, abstraction, number, the material and the social. At its most ambitious, physiognomy presents itself as an entire system of epistemology, ethics and socio-cultural praxis committed to turning back the rationalizing, disenchanting forces of capitalist modernity. At the level of knowledge, it argues for pre-rational intuition and sensory experience over instrumental reason; at the level of being, it claims that the visible characteristics of both individuals and cultures are the direct expressions of their internal essence or spirit, rather than the product of history or socialization; at the level of society, it projects a form of social order which is founded on the collective expression of this putative spirit, rather than adherence to abstract ideals or principles. Insofar as it presents itself as a critique of the reifying or “disenchanting” effects of capitalism, there are elements of this physiognomic worldview which might seem to lend themselves equally to an insurgency from the left or the right. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that the postulation of a natural social order grounded in biological characteristics can only be amenable with a reactionary political project, and those who believe otherwise – Bálazs, for instance – are at the very least guilty of a profound category error.

In the first instance, the physiognomists’ tool was the visual sense, and their object, the human body. Both of these, they believed, were being corroded by the rationalizing bent of modern culture. A particularly common trope is the notion that contemporary humanity has become so “epistemological” or “conceptual” in its apprehension of the world that it has forgotten how to know it through immediate visual experience. Bálazs, for instance, argued that “[people] have been able to glean so much from reading that they could afford to neglect other forms of communication…the *visual* spirit was transformed into a legible spirit, and a *visual culture* was changed into a conceptual one.”[[390]](#footnote-390) In other words, people had got so used to grasping the world through printed language that they had forgotten how to see things “in themselves.” In a similar vein, Hans F.K. Günther pitied the “unplastic Germans [who] meander through the streets of their cities…without ever having an inkling of this or that wrinkle in the eyelid, this particular form of the cheekbone,” going on to argue that:

We lack the ability to see in fresh ways; all our perceptions are clouded by an absence of creative observation, something that is characteristic of an age like ours that relies so heavily on calculation...Our age, which is often noted for its accomplishments in the natural sciences, has brought us to the point – due to its solely calculative procedure, due to its epistemological methodology, which necessarily translates everything that appears immediately to our senses into a numerical expression – this age has brought us to the point that our senses themselves have been enfeebled, that the structuring powers of our empirical perception have dissipated.[[391]](#footnote-391)

Physiognomy, therefore, must first of all set out to correct this overly rationalized vision, this sight which seeks to conform visual data to a numerical category or an abstract principle before absorbing it in its essential particularity. This is, ostensibly, the pedagogical vocation of most physiognomical projects – a great ocular education, designed to remove the scales of quantitative vision from the eyes and restore the ability to see into the life of things. “Our gaze,” Günther vowed, “can be trained, or at the very least: we can develop the power to see and grasp the body as meaningful.”[[392]](#footnote-392)

The ideal of physiognomic vision is a fascinating combination of Romantic and positivistic elements. On the one hand, it is founded in a scrupulous observation of the concrete details of the face and body. On the other, the conclusions to be drawn from these details cannot, in the final analysis, be based upon any systematic principle, since this would simply restate the dominance of the rational and the abstract over the visual. Oswald Spengler’s solution to this paradox was to propose a concept which he called “physiognomic tact”, an innate and intuitive faculty whereby the observer “seizes and pierces men and facts with one blow, guided by a feeling which cannot be acquired by learning or affected by persuasion,” [[393]](#footnote-393) a “physiognomic flair which enables one to read a whole life in a face.”[[394]](#footnote-394) This perceptual aptitude immediately organises the plain data of the visual sense, not according to an abstract principle but through what seems to partly a practiced knack and partly a quasi-mystical sensitivity to telling details and hidden structures. It is a form of heroic prowess – a superpower, really – that allows its possessor to see into the hearts of men and uncover the hidden pattern of essences that governs (or ought to govern) reality.

We should be in no doubt, therefore, that physiognomic vision is a mastering, phallic gaze. Spengler describes it quite explicitly as an exercise of the dominance of the perceiver over the perceived: “The adept of human beings seizes the alien psyche by comprehending it. That is power, superiority of the person who comprehends over the person who is comprehended.”[[395]](#footnote-395) But who, exactly, is entitled to wield this power, and who must submit themselves to it? Here, a contradiction emerges. Spengler describes “physiognomic tact” as an innate ability that “cannot be acquired by learning or affected by persuasion.” If this is truly the case, though, then it is difficult to see what is to be gained by publishing on the topic (beyond the petty considerations of wealth, prestige, notoriety etc). Why attempt to explain the physiognomic worldview when the only people who could possibly profit from it are already by disposition masters of the art? Ironically, the point of this restriction is not so much to govern who is entitled to practice physiognomy (a contingency which will in any case be worked out according to pre-existing social hierarchies), but rather *how* it is practiced. The goal of Spengler’s posturing is not to assert that the physiognomic knack is incommunicable *per se*, but rather to encourage the reader to associate themselves with the exceptional figure of the physiognomist. The subject, privileged by the personal address of Spengler’s text, identifies with the figure of the master and through this identification attains “physiognomic tact.” Membership of the physiognomic elect is therefore made dependent upon the acceptance of the Spenglerian method.

What, then, was the object of physiognomic seeing? There is such firm consensus on this issue as to leave no room for doubt. The gift of physiognomic vision is fundamentally an ability to detect the visual markers of race, conceived not so much as a genetic category as a kind of collective spiritual essence pertaining to a certain “nation” of people. Even in the case of the Marxist Bálazs, physiognomic perception is understood as a means of understanding, and even controlling, the determining influence of race upon human identity and human behaviour. Spengler, Bálazs, Günther et al are likewise perfectly clear about what motivates their desire to reassert the essential nature of racial categories. It is a response to the great processes of massification and proletarianization which took place throughout the mid-to-late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wherein all over Europe people migrated away from rural communities, leaving behind rigidly stratified social hierarchies and ancestral ties to the land, to be thrown together in teeming metropolises where the nature of their accommodation and employment worked to level the local distinctions which had previously bound individuals to particular places and social roles. This blurring together of discrete characteristics under the influence of intense social and physical proximity is directly related to the neurotic fear of bodily dissolution that dogs Theweleit’s Fascist man. Both are equally reactions to the threat of a revolution so total that no classification, no border, no axis of domination is left untouched by its tidal surge.

For Spengler, all of these anxieties are crystallised in the image of the “world city” or “megalopolis”, where peoples from all kinds of ethnic and geographic backgrounds are sundered from their native soil and mingled together into an indistinguishable morass:

In place of a world, there is a *city*, *a point*, in which the whole life of broad regions is collecting while the rest dries up. In place of a type-true people, born of and grown on the soil, there is a new sort of nomad, cohering unstably in fluid masses, the parasitical city dweller, traditionless, utterly matter-of-fact, religionless, clever, unfruitful, deeply contemptuous of the countryman and especially that highest form of countryman, the country gentleman…The world-city means cosmopolitanism in place of “home,” cold matter-of-fact in place of reverence for tradition and age, scientific irreligion as a fossil representative of the older religion of the heart, “society” in place of the state, natural instead of hard-earned rights.[[396]](#footnote-396)

Spengler’s counterpoint to the world-city was his notion of the Hellenistic polis, which he characterised as a) the site of prodigious creativity in the arts, politics, mathematics, philosophy and the humanistic disciplines in general, and b) being governed by a homogeneous racial caste and inextricably associated with “a mother-region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its whole life-cycle.”[[397]](#footnote-397) The vitality of the polis’ culture, in other words, is linked directly to the maintenance of racial purity; in fact, the very life of that culture can be defined as “an inner passionate struggle to maintain the Idea against the powers of Chaos without and the unconscious muttering deep-down within,” once again reiterating the motif of internal and external dissolution that Theweleit identifies as the root of the fascist impulse. Once a culture has began to look outwards, extending itself beyond its native locality and embracing cosmopolitanism over insularity, the slide towards the profane vulgarity of life in the world city is inevitable. Conversely, in the context of the world city race emerges as a means (perhaps the only means) by which this undifferentiated mass of humanity can be sorted back into the kind of stable hierarchy that is required to sustain an authentic culture.

Racial hygiene is therefore the implicit recommendation of the Spenglerian worldview. At the same time, the tenor of his work is generally one of overwhelming fatalism. As he saw it, the processes of civilizational decadence were built immutably into the arc of history. His diagnosis of the West’s decline was packaged as a kind of tragic knowledge, the intellectual consolation of a mordant, self-superior and indolent Last Man. If his work contains social prescriptions, they are largely in the form of dog-whistles and winks to those who know.

Other physiognomic thinkers had more activist goals. For a Bálazs or a Günther, the point was not to appeal to the sensibilities of a preordained elite, but to proselytize the principles of physiognomic vision to as broad a population as possible. From this perspective, the textual basis of Spengler’s pedagogy constituted a fundamental limitation. It is the textual basis of Spengler’s pedagogy which constitutes its fundamental limitation. Aside from the paradox of attempting to characterize a visual practice in verbal terms (an unavoidable issue for any physiognomic text), even a book as popular as Spengler’s can only reach a certain number of readers, circumscribed by the cost of the book, its prohibitive length, and the pompous scholarly register in which it is written. Spengler himself may have considered this a benefit, but for those with real ambitions to transform the visual practices of an entire nation, not to say civilization, it was a frustrating obstacle to be overcome. Hence the need for a mass medium, a means of communicating physiognomic technique on a wider basis. It is at this point that the physiognomists turn to the question of visual technology, even to the point of incorporating it directly into their texts.

The promise of photography and cinema is their capacity to perform the act of physiognomic vision for a mass audience. Through their mechanical objectivity, they could reveal to the people what their clouded, “conceptual” vision had blinded them to. Through their mechanical manipulability, they could be organized so that the principles of the master’s gaze were already built into the very structure of the image. We shall shortly be considering some concrete examples of how this latter aim was achieved. At this point, though, it is necessary to point out the obvious paradox here. Visual technology is simultaneously expected to embody transparent, “objective” vision and to reproduce the structured gaze of the master. This was a contradiction that physiognomy seldom avowed openly. At the rhetorical level, photography and cinema are figured almost exclusively in terms of their mechanical transparency. Bálazs addresses this issue with an inspired piece of lyrical evasion which he calls the “naturalism of love”:

Close-ups are a kind of naturalism. They amount to the sharp observation of detail. However, such observation contains an element of tenderness, and I should like to call it the naturalism of love. For what you truly love you also know well and you gaze upon its minutest details with fond attentiveness…In films with good close-ups you often gain the impression that these shots are the product not so much of a good eye as of a good heart. They radiate warmth, a lyricism whose particular artistic significance is that it moves us without lapsing into sentimentality. It remains impersonal and objective.[[398]](#footnote-398)

For a piece of obfuscatory doublethink, this passage is remarkably ingenuous – the value of cinema is that it renders an eminently partial, subjective and ideological (read: “tender”) act of observation as if it were “impersonal and objective.” In this way, visual media provides the capacity for physiognomy to go overground. No longer restricted by difficult, obscure texts or the inherent limitations of the print medium, it now reckoned with the potential of embodying its visual practices in a form that was both a)visual, and b)accessible to a mass audience.

**Face of Our Time**

It remains now to be seen how the preoccupations and ideology of physiognomy were translated into a concrete image-making practice. An exemplary incidence of this is *Face of Our Time* (1929) by August Sander, unquestionably the most enduring photobook of the period. *Face of Our Time* contained a selection of portrait photographs excerpted from Sander’s never-to-be-completed project *People of the 20th Century*, an attempt to capture and catalogue the entire spectrum of contemporary German society, organised chiefly by categories of vocation and social background. The work is characterised by the curious combination of an anal-retentive bourgeois fascination with the minutiae of social distinction and an almost Borgesian delight in the paradoxes of a system of infinite classification. The search for the “face of our time” is not centred on any one kind of visage in particular, but introduces us in turn to bricklayers, literary critics, farmers, communist leaders, boxers, soldiers, buskers, and most famously a pungently self-assured pastry chef, momentarily condescending to look up from his work to allow the photographer to make his shot. Sander also purposefully trained his lens upon social strata which the Nazis would later make every effort to destroy, both figuratively and literally – unemployed workers, left-wing activists, the mentally ill, and the Jewish. His self-avowed aim, as he explained it in a radio lecture of 1931, was to provide a physiognomic definition of the German people of the period,” to create a “historical image…[by joining] together pictures typical of the many different groups which make up human society.”[[399]](#footnote-399)

The collection was published with an introduction from the novelist Alfred Döblin, whose *Berlin Alexanderplatz* had come out the very same year. This short essay attempts to demonstrate the historical urgency of Sander’s project by combining and rearticulating several of the physiognomic themes we have observed above. *Face of Our Time* is, he argues, an essential response to what he calls “the astonishing levelling out of faces and images by human society, by class distinctions, by the cultural attainments of each class.” By “levelling,” he clarifies, he means “assimilation, the blurring of personal and private distinctions, the fading away of these differences under the stamp of a greater power.”[[400]](#footnote-400) Once more, we encounter the assertion that the face is becoming homogenized, and that the distinctions that mark out one face (or type of face) from another are beginning to fade. He compares this process to the changes that come over a face after death. Surveying a book of photographs of death masks both historical and contemporary (another popular subgenre of the photobook), he observes that “what they all have in common is something negative: something has been taken away from each of these persons… The immense burden of momentary existence, of change and alteration, has been erased from these faces. Death has carried out a massive retouching operation.”[[401]](#footnote-401) (8-9)

Facial individuality, Döblin suggests, is the product of the action of vital forces upon the body:

They [the faces] became individual, personal, and unique in life through two great processes: they were shaped by their race and the development of their personal talents – and by the external elements of nature and society, which alternately promoted and hindered their development.[[402]](#footnote-402)

In his contemporary society, however, it seemed that this balance had been skewed. The “external” social element had become so predominant as to stifle and even erase the effects of race and personality, imposing a uniform negativity upon the faces of all individuals so that they appeared as hard and lifeless as death-masks. What could drive such a process? Here, Döblin turns to the metaphor of the “ant-heap”:

But what can we say about an ant-heap?...No matter how closely we observe the insects, it is impossible for us to perceive more detail than certain general characteristics of the species, or insignificant differences between individuals. It is absolutely impossible to differentiate between them…viewed from a certain distance, distinctions vanish; individuals cease to exist, and only universals persist.[[403]](#footnote-403)

He saw the problem as one of perspective. Viewed *en masse* human faces become like ants on an ant-heap – obscure, indistinguishable, characterised only by their participation in a disturbingly fluid collectivity. The symbolism is explicit – in the vast “world-cities” of modernity, where nomadic peoples are detached from the lands and the communities which had once defined them and intermingled with various other social and ethnic groupings, the characteristics which had previously distinguished them are lost in the roiling mass. Döblin takes Spengler’s anxieties about the city, cosmopolitanism, and the “systematic”, abstract and quantitative bent of modern “civilization” and applies them explicitly to the problem of contemporary faciality.

He also follows Spengler in prescribing physiognomy as the solution to this crisis. What is of particular interest in Döblin, however, and absolutely crucial to how physiognomy functions within the discourse of the crisis of faciality, is his identification of photographic technology as the medium through which the physiognomic cure is to be applied. It is photography which enables the necessary correction of perspective, not only bringing us closer to the ant-heap, but separating the ants out from one another and inserting them into a serialised structure which ranks them according to categories of class and vocation. What this enables is an analysis of contemporary society which proceeds, not by applying dry, abstract classifications (which after all partake of the same “systematic” tendency which creates the problem in the first place), but by appealing directly to the intuitive and immediate visual sense. Döblin explains:

What you have before you is a kind of cultural history, or rather sociology, of the last thirty years. With his vision, his mind, his faculty of observation, his knowledge, and last but not least his immense photographic talent, Sander has succeeded in writing sociology not by writing, but by producing photographs – photographs of faces and not mere costumes. Just as one can only achieve an understanding of nature or of the history of the physical organs by studying comparative anatomy, so this photographer has practised a kind of comparative photography and achieved a scientific viewpoint above and beyond that of the photographer of detail.[[404]](#footnote-404)

Through this “visual sociology”, Sander allows his readers to get some purchase on the revolutionary changes currently reordering society. Indeed, despite Döblin’s claims that Sander’s project is “without prejudice,”[[405]](#footnote-405) a certain ideological account of the social transformations produced by capitalist modernity is implicit in the very structure of the book. As Hake points out, *Face of Our Time* traces a linear “trajectory…from the country and the small town to the big city,” starting with images of aged farm labourers, moving gradually into small landowners and rural teachers before progressing to various forms of city-dweller concluding with three images of the urban proletariat – a “cleaning woman”, a “redundant seaman” and a man simply described as “unemployed”. As Hake sensitively describes, this last figure “with his collarless shirt, torn jacket, and shaven head…reenacts the loss of all attributes of social distinction. Therefore, he turns away from the camera in painful recognition of his depersonalization.”[[406]](#footnote-406) This is purposefully contrasted with the collection’s first image of an old farmer in his Sunday clothes, staring directly into the camera with a pair of reading glasses held in his lap, as if to allude to the process of visual “correction” which is about to take place.

As Döblin makes explicit, this comparison marks the societal and historical transition from a rural peasant class whose faces and bodies are supposed to bear the marks which distinguish both their social and their geographic provenance to an urban proletariat who have been stripped of all signs of individual or collective distinction. The “country people”, he explains, form a “stable” type because “the form of the peasant smallholding has long had a certain stability.” The relatively unchanged nature of rural labour throughout history combined with the racial homogeneity of the peasant class has supposedly lent their faces a very definite character:

Among them one sees complete families, and even without seeing their ploughs and fields one can see that the work they do is rough, hard, and monotonous. It is work that makes their faces tough and weather-beaten. One can see, too, how they change under new conditions, how their faces are softened by wealth and easier forms of activity.[[407]](#footnote-407)

Note how the transition away from the supposedly clearly-defined physiognomies of the rural labourers is figured as a “softening”. A link is made between facial levelling and weakness or decadence – this connection is then imposed upon city-living and urban occupations of all kinds. The state of the “unemployed” worker is implicitly one of bodily and spiritual degeneracy, either pitiable or contemptible, depending on one’s political outlook.

**Physiognomic Perspective, Bourgeois Individualism and Racial Standardization**

It is important to recognise here that whilst Döblin makes great play of the decay of “individuality”, as if that were the value that was being corroded by modernity, individuality is not after all the quality which he expects physiognomic photography to restore to its subjects. Sander’s photographs are supposed to alert us to signs of collective identity, whether this is the “blood and soil” homogeneity of the rural labourers or the vocation and class-based categorisations of the urban figures. The point is not to recognise unique and irreducible individuality, but to lay out a system for the visual organization of society and test it against the faces of a range of representative figures. This, incidentally, is how Sander himself described his project: “The historical image will become even clearer if we join together pictures typical of the many different groups which make up human society…The time and the group-sentiment will be especially evident in certain individuals whom we can designate by the term, the Type.”[[408]](#footnote-408)

If the concept of individuality is operative anywhere in this project, it coheres around the auteur-figure of Sander himself. According to the tenets of the photographic realism which Sander practices, Döblin describes the photographic apparatus as a transparent medium through which we identify directly with the perception of the photographer. “I do not regard the photographic lens as seeing any differently from the human eye,” he avers. The perspectival correction that the photograph is supposed to offer, then, is not seen as a property of the apparatus but rather of the individual genius of the photographic artist – “his vision, his mind, his faculty of observation, his knowledge, and last but not least his immense photographic talent.” [[409]](#footnote-409) When we read *Face of Our Time*, we are encouraged to identify ourselves with the masterful gaze of the photographer, who, on the basis of his intuitive genius, organizes society into a hierarchy of self-evident categories. Spengler’s physiognomic tact is translated from a vague rhetorical injunction into a concrete visual practice.

On this basis, we might start to suspect that the function of “individuality” within both Sander’s visual practice and Döblin’s discourse on its behalf amounts to little more than a form of special pleading on the behalf of the class to which both photographer and physician-novelist belonged – the urban professional bourgeoisie. Fearful of losing the economic, social and cultural privileges which underwrote their own individuality to a much more literal form of “levelling”, this class consoles itself by constructing a microcosmic pocket-panopticon of their contemporary society, in which their discerning eye is the implicit, invisible centre. This anxious eye forms the stable point from which the series of the faces of contemporary Germany is to be viewed; this eye which chooses to hypostatize work as a principle of organisation, and then to essentialize it by inscribing it upon the bodies of the workers. The aim is to reproduce the image of society as stable hierarchy of natural signs, grounded not in the mechanism of the profit motive but in an organic order emerging from the “soul” and manifesting itself in the face. The means by which this is achieved is a covert standardization of perspective, effected through the technology of the photobook.

In his 1931 radio lecture “Photography as a Universal Language”, Sander described how “Today with photographs we can communicate our thoughts, conceptions, and realities to all the people of the earth.”[[410]](#footnote-410) As we have just discovered, however, the ground of this “universality” is nothing other than the benevolent perspective of the middle-class liberal observer for whom the various subjects of his photography are presented in their uniform legibility. Of course, the accommodation of universality to the values and experiences of the white bourgeoisie is nothing remarkable in twentieth century Western culture. What must be remarked on in this particular case is the equation of this bourgeois worldview with the “neutrality” of the technical apparatus under the sign of a universal humanism. Here, Sander’s work points the way towards a standardization far more extensive than the individuation of types ostensibly presented in the body of his text – the reduction of the world not merely to single perspective, but a single body and a single face.

**Restoring the National Physiognomy**

The year 1933, amongst other things, also saw the first meeting of the Society of German Photographers. The keynote address was given by an artist whose star had risen dramatically in the last twelve months – the photographer Erna Lendvai-Dircksen. Her portraits of “exemplary” specimens of the German race had secured her the patronage of the new regime, and would subsequently appear in Nazi propaganda and educational material, as well as being feted in the fascist press. Later that year, Goebbels himself would introduce a prestigious display of her work at the *Die Kamera* exhibition in Berlin. Rittelmann dubbed her “the Leni Riefenstahl of still photography.”[[411]](#footnote-411) She more than earns that dubious honorific.

Her speech to her fellow practitioners ends with the following call to arms:

Everyone who can see that this [i.e. the election of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany] is the turning point of our nation, the last salvation, has the inescapable obligation to contribute to a new formation of the decaying German physiognomy. We do not relinquish the belief and hope that it can rise again in this lost era, to its former natural beauty.[[412]](#footnote-412)

In line with the universal militarization which characterised fascist society, photographers too had received their mission from the top – to restore the “decayed” face of the German people. This was not a piece of abstract rhetoric. On the contrary, it constitutes a concrete expression of Dircksen’s entire aesthetic, as well as a direct reference to the crisis of faciality.

Dircksen, whose published photobooks included the multi-volume *The Face of the German Völk* (first published 1932) and a project documenting the construction of the autobahn in 1937, trained her lens primarily upon rural agricultural workers, who in her words “remained connected their entire life…to the material and blood of nature and her rhythms”[[413]](#footnote-413) – a pointed contrast with the decadent, alienated city dweller. Her portraits from the mid-1930s are characterised by her use of extreme close-up and dramatic chiaroscuro lighting. The faces are vast within the frame; what little background is visible is typically blank or blurred. Her aesthetic is driven by a dual principle of radical isolation and reduction. First of all the head and the face are cut off from the rest of the body and from any context which might allude to broader social or economic determinations, and second, the face is subjected to conditions of staging and lighting which aim to condense the image to a handful of dominant features. In her portrait of a *Young Hessian Farmer* (1930), the use of profile and strong frontal lighting boils the face of the titular woman down to the unbroken line of brow, nose and jaw which discriminates her countenance from the dark background. Similarly, the light that falls from left to right across the face of the *Schwälmer Miller* (c. 1920-29) subjects it to a bipolar opposition between the dazzling glare of his forehead and the black pits of his eyes, a contrast repeated across every plane and hollow of his cheek and mandible.

In both images, a certain distribution of features is privileged as fundamental, whether this is the geometric angles of the farmer’s profile, or the topographic reliefs of the miller’s visage. Shadow and light lie across the face like the sheet of paper used in a brass rubbing – what it aims to reproduce is not the colour and texture of the surface but a relief of the hard underlying structure. This obliteration of (sur)face detail in favour of skeletal forms is emblematic of the more or less effortful striving for essence which is detectable throughout Dircksen’s work; a determination to present each face in terms of what is impersonal and monumental, to draw out those features which seem to transcend the accident of individuality and therefore, so the logic goes, represent the collective ideal.

Whilst both are ostensibly committed to the goal of realizing the “face of a nation”, Dircksen’s methodology is in certain key ways fundamentally opposed to that of Sander. Whilst Sander works towards the idea of a gestalt “face” through a process of serial aggregation and comparative juxtaposition, Dircksen attempts to embody the ideal in a single image. Sander’s photographs are generous and inquisitive in their accumulation of detail, not only of bodies and faces but of backgrounds and environs, and they frequently allow their subjects a space for self-presentation, whether through the display of certain artefacts of their trade or the self-conscious manner in which they address the camera. Dircksen’s photographs occupy an abstract, formal space, figuring both subject and background in terms of pure geometry. Concomitantly, the preoccupations of her subjects seem ideal, not worldly; they gaze out of the frame in contemplation of essences. Sander’s work is organised around the hypostatised perspective of the bourgeois professional; if there is a central viewpoint in Dircksen’s work, it is the artist as a God-like creator, shaping the flesh to her will. Dircksen’s quest to revivify the face of the German nation involves a thoroughgoing rejection of the historical and social processes with which Sander attempts tentatively to engage, offering instead a technological palingenesis which seeks to impose, in the name of a natural order, a form of society organised around collective identification with a single ideal figure. In this, Dircksen is entirely representative of the broader practices of what we will call the tradition of Nazi physiognomy.

One of Dircksen’s other commissions was to provide photographs for *Völk und Rasse*, one of the most important journals of the German eugenics movement. As Rittelmann points out, her portraits also formed the basis of a poster entitled “Exemplary Heads of the German Racial Community”, which became a mandatory part of the grammar school curriculum.[[414]](#footnote-414) There was certainly, then, an institutional overlap between her ostensibly “artistic” practice and the ideology and iconography of contemporary eugenics and racial science. The corresponding formal affinities between the two can be illuminated by comparing Dircksen’s work to that of Hans F.K. Günther, a juxtaposition which will also help clarify the role of the face within Nazi ideology and racial policy.

**Race-Pope**

Popularly nicknamed “Race-Günther” and “Race-Pope”, Günther’s work on eugenics and racial science provided important theoretical scaffolding for Nazi racial policy. Insofar as such a thing can be said to have existed, his writings offer the “official” version of Nazi physiognomy, providing simultaneously a tool for educating the populace and a means for visually classifying and identifying those groups that the fascist hierarchy wished to erase. His *Short Racial Science of the German People* (1929 – an abridged, popular version of the “full-length” 1922 edition) became a staple of Nazi Germany's school curriculum. Images from the book were converted into pamphlets and posters for use in the classroom and at public lectures. His racial categories were adopted *in toto* by the SS, and his hermeneutic system employed as a means of identifying racial provenance amongst subject populations.[[415]](#footnote-415) In his *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*, Gray tells the fascinating story of one Reinhold Kohlhardt, a freelance physiognomist in Berlin (sample publications: "You Are Exposed" and "Your Skull Betrays You") who was in 1935 the subject of a menacing cease-and-desist order from the National Socialist Office for Racial Politics: "Kohlhardt is not the only one of this ilk; there are numerous other prophets who seek to pursue racial investigations in a similar way. We intend to take drastic action against these imposters."[[416]](#footnote-416) As Gray points out, the fact that there was a market for a man like Kohlhardt demonstrates the pervasiveness and popularity of physiognomic thinking in contemporary society. At the same time, the government’s hostile reaction to him demonstrates the state’s commitment to an “official”, licensed version of physiognomy and its desire to protect its monopoly over the ability to dictate which faces were subject to physiognomic interpretation, and how those faces were to be interpreted. The party’s persecution of this rogue physiognomist was, therefore, a defence of Güntherism as a physiognomical system.

Perhaps the chief advantage of Günther’s work, from the perspective of the party, was the straightforwardly literal-minded biologism through which it approached the questions of race and physiognomy. A race, as he defined it, was characterised quite simply by a unitary set of moral characteristics directly linked to a list of somatic features: “It is, or should be, quite clear that a ‘race’ must be embodied in a group of human beings each of whom presents the same physical and mental picture.”[[417]](#footnote-417) In his book *The Racial Elements of European History*, he lays out a set of categories which would help form the basis of Fascism’s racial hierarchy – Nordic, Dinaric, Mediterranean, Alpine, Slavic etc. His physical and characterological descriptions of these types are transparently value-laden, with certain physical characteristics particularly valorised as the sign of strength and virtue:

The cast of features in the Nordic race has often a characteristically bold effect owing to the threefold break in the line of the profile: first at the flattish, backward-bent forehead, then at the high-bridged nose, straight or bending outwards, and lastly at the firm, sharp-cut chin.[[418]](#footnote-418)

His account of the Jews was also of great importance – by characterising them in racial rather than cultural or religious terms, he attached their supposed traits directly to the “Jewish genotype”, casting the “Jewish Question” as a strictly biological issue, demanding a concomitantly “biological solution.”

Günther proposed a basically Spenglerian view of racial history, in which a dominant type (in his system, the “Nordic”) attains political and cultural hegemony by virtue of its innate advantages, only to slide gradually into decline, as its very success led ultimately to the dilution of the race through geographic dispersal and interbreeding. The only way to break this cycle was a concerted policy of racial hygiene, involving forced sterilizations, segregation and state-managed family planning (with, of course, the spectre of mass extermination looming at all times). It is at this point that physiognomy becomes a practical necessity for Günther and his adherents. Any system of racial hygiene would be futile without some means of sorting individuals into their appropriate racial categories. In Günther's system, this work is performed by physiognomy, the visual discipline dedicated to assigning these somatic features to their proper racial types. To this extent, Günther’s work is entirely characteristic of the palingenetic tendency described above. His physiognomy aims to discipline the face and the body through working upon the conditions under which they are perceived. In practice, this would mean creating the visual conditions under which race is directly perceived as biological category, reducible to a list of discrete physical traits, opening the possibility of a society organised according to the principles of Nordic supremacy and racial hygiene. In his own nightmarish formulation, he aspired to devise a mechanism which would “teach the eye to recognize valuable blood.”[[419]](#footnote-419)

This mechanism can be understood as composed of three main elements – 1) a rhetoric which critiques the accuracy of everyday visuality and establishes the visual-hermeneutic system constituting the new scopic regime, 2) a set of social practices and institutional structures either designed to support the new scopic regime or developing as a consequence of it, and 3) a repertoire of technologies of vision designed to demonstrate the new visuality in action. The task of this latter category is to mediate between the first two – to take the hermeneutic framework established in the text and translate it into a set of visual practices capable of reorienting both everyday perception and institutional policy. Hence, these technologies of vision are typically woven into the structure of the text itself, in the form of a system of images which serve to supplement the rhetorical discourse.

Like many physiognomists, Günther is extremely cosmopolitan in his selection of images. His *The Racial Elements of European History* (1924), for example, features photographs of contemporary Germans, Norwegians and Welshmen alongside reproduced portraits of Lermontov and Van Dyck, as well as shots of ancient Assyrian carvings. All of these various modes of image are treated equally as a source of the “characteristic” features of whatever race they supposedly instantiate, establishing a visual economy wherein photography, painting and sculpture can circulate as the signifiers of a commensurable value. This is reinforced by the uniformity of their composition – almost all of the images are rigidly profile, full-face, or three-quarter view. Careful juxtaposition of, say, a second century Egyptian “Mummy Portrait” and a photograph of a contemporary “Arab from South Algeria”, both addressing the viewer at a similar three-quarter angle, helps establish an equivalence between these totally foreign styles of depiction. Thanks to this rigorous compositional discipline, what would at first seem to be a glaring methodological weakness is actually made to function as a proof of Günther's premise – if equivalence can be established amongst this bizarre farrago of visual material, it must be (the logic goes) because each borrows its form equally from the pre-existing, transcendental structure of “the face”. Difference is rendered incidental – only sameness is legible within Günther's system, testifying, wherever it is found, to the existence of racial-somatic structures which transcend the individual.

This visual economy also helps to disarm the chief drawback of Günther's most modern technology of vision – photography. Of course, photography is in many respects an invaluable boon for the physiognomist, in its indexical relationship with the photographed object, its claims to mechanical “objectivity”, the ease with which its images can be reproduced and distributed, and the way in which it freezes the mobile features of the face, reifying its expressive fluidity as a field of rigid contours. The risk of photography, from the physiognomic perspective, lies in the relative “repletion”[[420]](#footnote-420) of the image it produces – precisely because it is the product of a mechanical process, a photograph will necessarily reproduce an amount of detail which is, from the perspective of a physiognomic hermeneutics, redundant. By reproducing a whole spectrum of temporary markings, expressive contortions and idiosyncratic bumps and knots, the photograph has the potential to unleash a blizzard of interference into the process of reading the unchanging essence of a creature's being from the features of its face. As a source of physiognomic data, a photograph is intransigent, messy, too scrupulously attentive to the moment of its conception, and liable to say more than its interpreter would desire.

The discipline of Günther's visual economy helps to mitigate the potential contingency of the photograph. The profile is particularly useful here. By turning the face away from us, it conceals the expressive zones of the mouth and eyes, instead presenting it in terms of the hard lines of the underlying skeletal structure – that is, exposing precisely those parts of the face which are legible in terms of Günther's system. Profile also occludes the frontality through which a face might address the observer, even through the matrix of a technological medium. We can say that the profile enacts the ideal hermeneutic practice of Günther's system, a mode of interpretation which is spread by analogy even to the full-face and three-quarter shots. Juxtaposed with a profile, the full-face becomes a mugshot, to be read solely as a measurable distribution of standard features. The full-face images in Günther's texts do not address us; instead, the face is opened and splayed in its raw materiality, subjected totally to a system of one-to-one correspondences between bodily features and racial characteristics.

We can see, then, how the visual practices of Dircksen and Günther are united by a number of common techniques: the analytic isolation of the face from the body and from its context, the frequent use of profile, the systematic reduction of surface detail as opposed to underlying structure, and most fundamentally the search for a racial essence in the physical structure of the face. Together, they present the outline of a general fascist faciality, a biopolitical project which seeks to utilize the face towards two parallel goals – on the one hand, to render it the emblem of a hypostatized collective identity, and on the other, to put it to work as a means of ordering and segregating subject populations. The fascist dream, akin in this respect to that of Bálazs, is for a world in which all faces and bodies are absolutely legible, each one inscribed with the mark of its position within a natural social order. The technology of photography was essential in transforming this ideal from an abstract projection into a tangible visual rhetoric. It is raised to its apotheosis, however, in the cinema.

**Physiognomy and the Problem of Cinema**

In general, both the technology of film and the institution of cinema are absent from the thoughts and writings of the physiognomists of this period, Bálazs being the only significant counter-example. It is not difficult, in the first instance, to imagine why this might be. For any form of physiognomy which seeks to attribute a fixed essence to the visual form of the face, the perpetual mobility of the cinematic image is inherently problematic. Sander’s project depends upon being able to hold the faces of his various social types in a fixed serial order, whereas that of Dircksen and Günther seeks at every point to immobilise the face, to show it in terms of what is hard and unfluctuating. The mobility of the cinematic image threatened to destroy the static, legible, photographic face hypostasized in Günther’s texts and anatomized in the posters and handbooks extrapolated therefrom; it heralded the dissolution of the hard lines and permanent structures from which race was to be read. On screen, the face trembles and wavers, the slightest twitch of the jaw spreading repercussions across the plane of the cheek and the brow, each form established and characterised by its contingency, each possible meaning like Nietzsche’s “flashing question-mark beside premature answers.”

This is obvious enough from the histrionics of a Lillian Gish or a Lon Chaney (“The Man with a Thousand Faces”, so-called), but even the face of Cesare, the hypnotized somnambulist in Wiene’s *The Cabient of Dr. Caligari* (1920), is wracked with surface tension; indeed, what is remarkable in Conrad Veidt’s performance here is precisely the playing off of minute, tremulous motions against the overall stillness of his visage, whited with greasepaint save for his dark lips and the black diamonds inked around his eyes.[[421]](#footnote-421) The scene of Cesare’s awakening before a rapt audience in Caligari’s fairground tent could, in fact, serve as a neat visual allegory for cinema’s animation of the photographic face. His eyebrows flutter, eyelids flinch, nostrils contract; a muscle twitches in his right cheek, eyes and lips part, and what seemed to be entirely fixed and immobile turns out to be composed of numberless fleeting movements. The shock of this revelation was registered in the rhetoric of film theorists – recall Epstein: “The orography of the face vacillates. Seismic shocks begin. Capillary wrinkles try to split the fault. A wave carries them away. Crescendo. A muscle bridles. The lip is laced with tics like a theater curtain. Everything is movement, imbalance, crisis.”[[422]](#footnote-422) How could physiognomy plant a flag in this unstable terrain?

Then there is the question of control, not only over how the face is to be read, but who it is to be read by. This returns us to the interpretive privilege enshrined in the concept of “physiognomic tact.” Without a framing text to authorise its proper meanings, not to mention diagrams, tables and other graphical heuristics, the pure visuality of cinema seemed to offer an uncomfortable degree of lassitude to the whims of the viewer. More disturbingly, it addressed itself directly to a mass audience – the very mass that physiognomy was setting out to order and discipline. As a popular mass medium, the cinema of the 1920s threatened to destroy the hierarchy of expertise which concentrated interpretive privilege in the hands of men like Spengler and Günther; it also held the potential to displace Sander’s bourgeois observer from his position of panoptic centrality by bestowing the power to read and categorise the social body upon the masses themselves. Balázs grasped this possibility with great acuteness when he conceptualised the cinematic viewer as a kind of mass-subject that he named the “spirit of the people”:

Film has become a fact, a fact that is producing such profound, universal, social and psychic effects that we must engage with it, whether we will or no. For film is *the popular art* of our century. Not, unfortunately, in the sense that it arises from the spirit of the people, but in the sense that it is out of film that the spirit of the people arises.[[423]](#footnote-423)

One of the chief sources of Balázs’ originality is his insistence, from the very beginning, on cinema as a form of mass-address, its very facticity dependent upon its popularity. For Balázs, the subject of the cinema is not, as it would be for later schools of film theory, the individual spectator-voyeur, but the audience, the mass, or the population. If later, psychoanalytically inclined theories sought to demonstrate how the structure of the apparatus produced a certain kind of cinematic subject, Balázs wanted to demonstrate how the technologies of film fuse with the structures of perception, memory and desire to create a new form of collective consciousness, or “spirit”. That is to say, he understood cinema as a potential form of biopower, a tool which can be used to shape human life at the level of population, rather than the individual. No other physiognomist grasped this possibility so clearly. The popular filmmakers of the Third Reich, on the other hand, would seize it with terrifying acuity.

**Junta’s Face**

The works of those directors who prospered in Germany post-1933 should be understood as strategically aligned with, even if they were tactically distinct from, the general operations of Nazi racial policy. These films, which ranged from period costume melodramas like Veit Harlan’s *Jud Süß* (1940), to the “documentaries” of Leni Riefenstahl, to straightforward propaganda such as Fritz Hippler’s *The Eternal Jew* (1940), sought to complement racial policy in several ways – by attempting to reveal the face as the locus of communal and racial identity, by entering into the project of “training” the audience to read faces (always the correct faces, and in the correct manner), and by producing and disseminating the ideal face of the German nation. To this end they employ a range of filmic techniques as part of an attempt to reproduce a set of visual practices and image-economies in a manner which is not altogether dissimilar to the texts of racial physiognomy, albeit they are operating in the register of biopower, as opposed to discipline. As Siegfried Kracauer observes, editing had a particularly important function in the style of Nazi film in general, and this is no different when we come to the specific question of the face.[[424]](#footnote-424) Techniques of editing, that operation of decomposition and construction which seeks so often to render its process invisible, were fundamental in the attempts of these filmmakers to naturalise the faces they produced for the screens of Nazi Germany.

It at this point that we return once more to Riefenstahl’s *The Blue Light* (1932), an exemplary precursor of many of the tropes which would come to characterise the presentation of the face in Nazi film. The picture tells the story of Junta (played by Riefenstahl), a mysterious young woman who lives in the mountains above a small village in the Tyrolean Alps. At the highest peak is a grotto filled with huge crystals; when the moon is full, it shines upon these crystals, haloing the summit with the titular blue light. The light seems to exert a hypnotic effect upon the young men of the village, who find themselves irresistibly compelled to scale the mountainside in the dead of night, eventually plummeting – having neglected to pack helmets, crampons or indeed climbing equipment of any variety – to their grisly deaths in the valley below. Junta, meanwhile, seems to have some mystical affinity with the mountain and the caves, traversing the cliff-side in nothing but her bare feet and her gypsy rags – this, along with the transfixed leering she is subjected to by the local men, leads the villagers to blame Junta for the deaths. Vigo (Mathias Wieman), a painter from “the city”, falls in love with Junta during a visit to the village, tracking her up into the mountains and eventually winning her confidence. On the next full moon he follows her up to the grotto, learning the secret route which allows her to navigate the peak unharmed. Wonderstruck by the thought of the fabulous wealth that the crystals could bring to the village, he rushes down the mountain to share the secret of how to reach the cave. The villagers set off with picks in hand; the next morning, coming upon the grotto now stripped of its glimmering majesty, a grief-stricken Junta flings herself to her death from the mountain-top. This story, we should also observe, is couched in a framing narrative about a modern-day German couple who visit the village and discover what Rentschler describes as a “thriving nascent culture industry”[[425]](#footnote-425) – a local economy of illustrated books and crystal-studded portraits telling the story of Junta and the mountain.

As indicated above, the political valences of *The Blue Light* have been the subject of prolonged controversy. From the specific perspective of the face, however, its proto-fascist tendencies seem perfectly unambiguous. Through the systematic use of graphic matches, matches on action and patterns of camera movement, as well as a rigorous control of *mise-en-scéne*, the film imposes a visual economy upon the faces it presents which is in its own way just as didactic as that employed by Günther. Particularly prominent is the film’s use of profile shots as an explicit means of presenting the face as the emblem of collective identity – in this instance, hypostatizing the racial unity of the villagers and emphasizing their connection with the land. As Rentschler observes:

Oskar Kalbus, an eminent film publicist in the Third Reich, praised the Alpine community's racial vitality, admiring physiognomies that extended back to the Visigoths. The village, effused a British commentator in the mid-1960s, appeared “to blend with all aspects of the past and present; time itself seemed petrified as the mute figures carved from rock; the faces of peasants appeared out of archaic time, touched by a stoic dignity.”

Rentschler goes on to observe that the faces of the villagers resemble “Dürer woodcuts”, and possess an “undeniable racial hardness,”[[426]](#footnote-426) but fails to probe how these impressions are the direct effects of cinematic composition as much as any inherent features of the people themselves. In an early scene, Junta passes through the streets of the village at nighttime, suffering the ostracizing gaze of the townsfolk she encounters. Outside a church, a row of older women turns to squint at her disapprovingly. An initial medium-shot captures Junta and the women at the moment that they turn towards her, with Junta occupying the right portion of the screen and the women on the left. We then cut to a close-up of the right-most woman, her head twisted ninety degrees from her chest so as to reveal her face in profile, her impressive nose and jagged chin particularly prominent. The background is dark, and her flat black hat forms a set of parallel lines with the dark shawl that covers her shoulder – the overall effect is a kind of reverse silhouette, with the outline of her white face framed by the black surround.

The camera then pans left to the second woman, posed in the same attitude with the same arrangement of background and costume. A brief cut back to Junta shows her fearful reaction in a full-face close-up, purposefully contrasting her expressive physiognomy with the immobile structures of the women’s, before returning to complete the panning movement left to finish on the face of a third and fourth woman, whose positioning and dress is again identical to those which had preceded them. As Junta flees the scene, a later shot takes us inside the church, where we are treated to a two-shot of a pair of bearded gentlemen with hooded eyes, hawkish eyebrows and another set of imposing aquiline noses. Leant forward in prayer, the men are also decked out with a pair of low-cut aprons, which expose the white front of their shirts below the neck as if to accentuate their beards – another graphic similarity which works to establish equivalence between the two figures.

The effect of this short sequence lies in Riefenstahl’s interweaving of several different aspects of cinematic technique – camera movement, editing, blocking, costume, lighting, colour – all in the service of a single end: the establishment of equivalence between the faces of the individuals she depicts, and through this the hypostatization of the face as the locus of communal and racial identity. On careful inspection, the faces of the four women are in many aspects dissimilar, but this realization demands a concerted reading against the grain, forearmed against the range of persuasive techniques that Riefenstahl has imposed upon the viewer’s imagination by an appreciation of the ideological goal she is striving to attain. Perhaps most significant is her employment of that particular cinematic quality which seemed to most threaten its usefulness as a tool of physiognomy – movement. The faces themselves are kept quite still, to the extent that they could actually be photographs torn out of one of Günther’s manuals. Instead, it is the camera that moves, leading the eye and imposing comparisons and equivalences between the images in a way that the subtlest photobook could never aspire to. In some ways, this use of camera movement actually heightens the stillness and hardness of the face by way of contrast. By extending this immobility across the time axis, Riefenstahl imbues it with a portentous, enduring quality, the sense of something that survives through and despite the passage of ages. It is here that the commonplace reflections on the resemblance of the craggy profiles of the villagers with the local mountain scenery become truly pointed – as the camera pans across mountainsides and cliff-faces on the one-hand, and outcropping cheekbones and overhanging noses on the other, the frozen persistence of the two are ineluctably interwoven, rendered interdependent. “Blood and soil.” Karsten Witte observed that the traveling shots in *Triumph of the Will* (1935) “work with induced movement to set inanimate matter into waving motion and make human masses freeze into stone blocks.”[[427]](#footnote-427) *The Blue Light* makes the first steps towards establishing this diabolical interplay between massive monument and human mass, imbuing vast rocky structures with vital energy whilst draining the face of every vestige of contingency and variation.

These techniques recur in the film whenever the integrity of the community is to be established against the invasive otherness of Junta. What, then, of Junta’s face? We have already observed how it serves as a counterpoint to the communal, racialized face of the villagers, shot in expressive full-face as opposed to profile or three-quarter view. Junta is certainly identified as possessing a different kind of face, which the audience is expected to engage with in a different manner. We first encounter her image in the modern framing narrative. As the young couple pull up in the village, their car is swarmed by local children with fistfuls of crystals, hoping to turn a quick profit on their treasures. One particularly cherubic youngster reaches into her basket and pulls out a small portrait of Junta in a crystal-studded frame, handing it to the man. Elbowing their way through the crowd and into the hotel, the first thing they see is another framed portrait of Junta set under the clock. The image dissolves into a shot of a crystal in a jar – not the first time this technique will be used to draw an association between Junta’s face and the crystals. Later, when the couple ask their hosts about the woman in the portraits, they are introduced to a colossal tome entitled “The History of Junta”, with another jewel-encrusted portrait on the cover. The shot dissolves from the portrait to a crystal lying on the bed of a mountain stream, leading us out of the modern-day diegesis and into the past. At the film’s conclusion, the reverse movement (from the past to the modern day) is conveyed through a dissolve from a soft-focus shot of Junta’s face as she lies dying on the mountainside back to the portrait on the cover of the book.

The association between Junta’s face and the crystal imbues the former with a kind of permanence, albeit of a very different kind from that of the villagers. A crystal is hard and enduring, like the stony visages of the townsfolk. However, Junta and the crystals are not “of the soil” in the same way that the villagers are. The characteristic quality of the townsfolk is their togetherness, their closeness to each other and to the fetishized notion of the “homeland”. On the other hand, Junta and the crystals are characterised by their physical and social isolation from the community. This apartness lends them an auratic quality, that “unique phenomenon of distance” which, for Benjamin, underwrites the “cult value” of certain objects.[[428]](#footnote-428) The auratic object is defined above all by its uniqueness – there is only one, and it cannot be copied. Hence, the only way to experience the object is to encounter it in the particular time and space in which it exists – for classical artwork, the gallery; for the holy relic, the temple. The appropriate attitude of the viewer of such an object is wonder, awe or any other variety of passive contemplation. Obscurity and exclusivity are essential to these effects. The power of the auratic object – its cult value – is founded upon the fact that it is not accessible to all people at all times. Indeed, aura and cult value are necessarily bound up in structures of privilege and violence. Benjamin’s “cult” refers to the socio-economic system which manages access to the auratic object, and ensures that this aura is not dissipated by over-exposure.

Benjamin’s notion of aura applies to the case of Junta and the crystal grotto with uncanny accuracy.[[429]](#footnote-429) In the early stage of the film, they are the source of passive fear and wonder on the part of the villagers, precisely because of their remoteness. If one is to experience Junta and the grotto face-to-face, it is necessary to penetrate their unique spatio-temporality by making the deadly climb to the mountain’s summit. The spatial elevation of the mountain and the danger it poses to the men of the village embody the hierarchical principle on which the allure of Junta and the grotto depends. Only an elect few are permitted to enter into the presence of the auratic object, and those who are seduced into making the attempt but do not possess the requisite entitlements are cast down.

The villagers’ desecration of the crystal grotto represents the levelling of this structure, and the conversion of “cult value” into “exhibition value”, which is to say, the metamorphosis of a value based on the object’s exclusivity into a value based on the breadth of its dissemination and reproduction. The crystals and Junta’s image are transformed from an obscure source of deadly wonder into commodities which the villagers can possess and through which they can enrich themselves. Their aura is dissipated – their value now derives from the rate and extent of their circulation throughout the community. For Benjamin, the political significance of the decay of aura under modern conditions of mechanical reproduction was the potential democratization of cultural value. By coming closer to the objects of cultural worth, he hoped, the masses might realise their power as the producers and creators of the culture which was currently being sold back to them by the institutions of state power and capital. However, the manner in which both Junta and the crystals are reified as commodities suggests a reverse operation – a desire to retain the surface appearance of aura, and the structures of privilege, exclusion and passive awe that it implies, even as the auratic object is repurposed as commodity.

This can be seen both in the way in which the image of Junta’s face is represented and the function of this image within the modern-day community. What we see in the film’s final dissolve is the fixing of Junta’s face, its crystallisation into a photograph (for this is what the image appears to be, notwithstanding the fact that there is not a camera to be seen). The image in which her face is frozen is not at all characteristic of her various attitudes within the film (frightened, playful, aghast). Her face is still, a plane of white broken only by a shadow that spreads beneath her right cheekbone, her dark lips and most of all her eyes, which seem to stare out of the picture with a kind of vacant intensity. This face is distant, remote – in other words, it is a face which aspires to the auratic, or at least to a kind of *auratic kitsch*, embodied above all in the crystal studded frame, each gem representing a shard of the pristine cult value which the object tries to recoup. The crystals support the opaque, reflective quality of the photograph itself, presenting a hard, gleaming surface which turns the gaze of the observer back on itself even as it absorbs it. It is not a face which is recognised – rather, it recognises the face of the observer. The importance of this inversion should soon become clear.

Insofar as it aspires to auratic value, the image of Junta’s face does not disclose a subjective content so much as it implies a relationship of power. That is, in its reproduction of the glamour of the auratic object, it also reproduces the hierarchical, cultic structures which the concept of aura implies. Junta’s face is not one that can be approached with familiarity, but one to be contemplated with passive awe. It is the face of a power that descends from above. In this sense, it resembles nothing so much as Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the “terrestrial signifying despotic face”:

A multiplication of eyes. The despot or his representatives are everywhere. This is the face as seen from the front, by a subject who does not so much see as get snapped up by black holes. This is a figure of destiny, *terrestrial* destiny, objective signifying destiny. The close-up in film knows this figure well: the Griffith close-up of a face, an element of a face or facialized object, which then assumes an anticipatory temporal value (the hands of a clock foreshadow something).[[430]](#footnote-430)

In Deleuze and Guattari, the concept of subjectivity is always haunted by the idea of “subjection”, in the sense that the construction of the subject always takes place within the “objective” signifying order dictated by the dominant social order. This is what is implied by their term “subjectification.” In the eyes (or “black holes”) of the despotic face we find the gaze of subjectification *par excellence* – this is the face which recognises us, which subjectifies us according to the orders and forms of the power it serves. The classical literary instance of this is Orwell’s “Big Brother” – “black-haired, black mustachio’d, full of power and mysterious calm, and so vast that it almost filled up the screen”[[431]](#footnote-431) – the face which is explicitly designed to remind the people of Airstrip One of the ubiquity of the state’s gaze, and therefore to serve as a demonstration of all that there is of subjection in their subjecthood. The face of Junta has a comparable interpellating function – it represents the eye which penetrates the flesh of the villagers and sees the purity of the national soul beneath, the gaze which organises their physiognomies into a homogenized racial collective. Indeed, this is true in a strikingly literal sense, insofar as the image of Junta shows us *the face of the director herself*, “full of power and mysterious calm” (in marked contrast to the trembling, affected face of the actor), the agency responsible for the various techniques which have in actual fact drawn the faces of the villagers together to form this imagined community of blood.

We can see how this plays out in terms of the function of Junta’s image within the community. Within the modern-day framing narrative, the image of Junta serves to fix and sustain the village’s collective identity. As Rentschler puts it:

The village works over reality and reproduces itself, recycling signs from the past as a form of pseudoeternity, making mountains and mountain girls into powerful images and spellbinding tales.[[432]](#footnote-432)

That is to say, it is the activity of reproducing and circulating the image of Junta’s face (activities which remain firmly within the purview of the twentieth century culture industry) which allows the village to sustain its simulacral unity of blood and soil, the “pseudoeternity” of a racially pure people bound by blood to the land. Furthermore, as Rentschler points out, the endurance of Junta’s face (particularly in this remote, impassive form) serves to mask the act of violent desecration which enabled the village to establish its miniature culture industry in the first place:

The community continues to circulate the story, marketing a legend purchased at a bloody price. The chronicle both acknowledges and yet glosses over the fact of violence and expropriation, rendering the mercenary act as a necessary evil – in Kracauer's words, a “rational solution.”[[433]](#footnote-433)

Again, the function of Junta’s face is to unite the community by allowing them to forget the abuses upon which that very community was established. At the moment of her death, she is transformed from a figure which is excluded and marginalized by the village into the idol which sustains its unity. The final dissolve which presents the transition from her dead body to the crystal-studded photograph is therefore an act of sublimation, converting violence and dissension into sameness and unity. On a more fundamental level, it also entails the transformation of the face as a site of difference, tension and intersubjective negotiation into an idol around which communities can be formed and behind which exclusions and expropriations are masked.

**The Despotic Face**

To recapitulate, Riefenstahl’s *The Blue Light* treats the face in two distinct ways. First, we have the use of an array of cinematic techniques to create the homogenized face of a racial community. Second, we see the genesis of a different kind of face – impassive, fixed, head-on as opposed to profile, at once a commodity which circulates throughout the community and an idol which stands silent at its centre. If the first kind of face is a face that is read and observed, the second represents the power that reads and observes. It is around the image of this “despotic face” that the idea of a racial community is cohered and unified.

This pattern, established for the first time in *The Blue Light*, is repeated and refined in Riefenstahl’s later works, particularly *The Victory of Faith* (1933)[[434]](#footnote-434) and *Triumph of the Will* (1935)[[435]](#footnote-435), the two “documentaries” which she made about the fifth and sixth Nazi Party rallies at Nuremberg. In both of these pictures, we see an attempt to produce the face of an idealised, racially homogeneous German *Volk* around the central image of the figure who sees and recognises them as such – the *Führer*. Both films are similar in content and execution, with *The Victory of Faith* serving as a laboratory for the techniques which would be carried off on a grander scale and with a bigger budget in *Triumph* (the former, in fact, was suppressed following the Night of the Long Knives owing the unfortunate prominence it afforded the erstwhile SA kingpin Ernst Röhm). What we get, in both instances, is an elaborate assemblage of tracks and pans sweeping across Nuremberg’s monumental architecture, combined with footage of vast crowds saluting and weeping, military parades, motorcades, speeches (many, many speeches), swaying flags, brandished insignia, and at the centre of it all of course the *Führer*, now stern, now grinning, arm jutting indefatigably, periodically flicking his straying forelock away from his brow.

One of the first things that strikes a contemporary viewer of these films is the parsimony with which the image of the *Führer* is deployed, and especially his face. There is even a kind of bizarre coyness in the way that Hitler’s visage is withheld in the early sequences of *The Victory of Faith*. After a concerted build-up featuring marching soldiers, delirious crowds, saluting children, a motorcade shot from above and from street level and assorted Nazi hangers on gurning and flapping their hands – as if all these things were merely epiphenomena of the great presence yet to be disclosed – the *Führer* bustles somewhat unceremoniously from his private plane, marching past a camera that can only track his movements reactively. As Hitler clambers into a car to make a tour of the city streets, the camera hops into the seat behind him, so that the viewer is left staring at the back of the *Führer*’s head or else peeking impertinently over his shoulder. All the while, Hitler is in motion, his attention focussed anywhere but the camera, which is never allowed to venture too close. This forms the blueprint for a parallel sequence in *Triumph of the Will*, distinguished by the greater audacity and elaborateness of its editing and camera positions (we follow Hitler’s plane as it soars through the clouds, the camera shifts position within the car whilst still only showing the back and sides of Hitler’s head and so on).

Throughout the whole course of *The* *Victory of Faith*, Hitler is never shot in close-up, and never recorded full-face. This is symptomatic of a general effort to maintain distance between the image of the *Führer* and the spectator – a tactic which, as Claudia Schmölders points out, is not original to Riefenstahl’s films but an element of Hitler’s overall media strategy from an early stage:

Hitler's performances as public speaker in the years between 1919 and 1923 were received differently from his later ones, precisely because it was only possible to hear him, not really to see or to photograph him. According to his first biographer, Konrad Heiden, Hitler had forbidden anyone to take pictures of him. “During rallies, he knew how to stay invisible by way of clever lighting tricks. When he entered a hall, he quickly walked through an alley formed by his SA and remained for most visitors a hushing, instantly fading impression.”[[436]](#footnote-436)

This quality of reticence remained even after the point at which Hitler became the most photographed man in Germany – the transition being not so much from refusing photographs to allowing them as from seeking to control his image by withholding it to a careful management of the conditions under which it was revealed. It is noticeable that the habit of “quickly [walking] through an alley” of onlookers is extremely prevalent throughout *Victory* and *Triumph*, films which constantly propel their hero through a gauntlet of deranged adoration. A characteristic shot from both pictures is a pan which follows Hitler’s movements in an arc as he passes through this corridor of onlookers. The effect of such a shot is a constant modulation between distance and presence – Hitler is perpetually coming into view, approaching, impending, and then in the same movement passed, receding, and gone – only for this dynamic to repeat in the next shot or the one after that.

The purpose of such a technique is clear enough – Riefenstahl’s films employ every effort to generate a sense of aura around the figure of Hitler, so that no matter how widely his image is circulated, something of a rarefied, cultic presence still clings to his person. It is frequently remarked that films and photographs fail to capture the essence of Hitler’s presence, especially his face and most especially his *gaze*. Schmōlders cites Heiden once more, who opined that:

There are no pictures of Hitler. No photography can capture his double existence, which flits constantly between its two poles. What we have are depictions of the different states of the substance Hitler. He is never himself; he is at any minute a lie of himself; this is why every image is false. The photographic plate lays hold only onto his external appearance, and this appearance is an inferior shell.[[437]](#footnote-437)

Schmölders, meanwhile: “The power of Hitler's transfixing gaze – universally reported – demands to be *experienced*, even if by eyewitness account or through propagandistic lore. No photograph, no film managed to capture it.”[[438]](#footnote-438) And the Georgian writer Grigol Robakidse: “I see him on the numerous images, but he looks different on every picture. You could think that his inner gaze escapes the lens: an unmistakable characteristic of the “distant face.””[[439]](#footnote-439)

This strange paradox is the ground of Hitler’s mass-produced, manufactured aura. His face is a commodity which rests in the hands of the consumer, pretending to answer that desire to “to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction”[[440]](#footnote-440) that Benjamin understood as one of the most powerful tendencies of modernity, whilst at the same time receding, resisting possession and therefore leaving the sense of a lack, that something unreproducible has slipped through the media net. Whatever the nature of Hitler’s “actual” presence, the feeling of his “real” gaze, it is essential to grasp that this perceived lack is actually a consistent structural element of Riefenstahl’s representation, a piece of *Wizard of Oz* legerdemain. That face, which always seems to slither away from the steady gaze, is the cipher for Hitler’s mystical presence, deliberately excised from the mediated world of the film as a form of mute testimony to its power in “unmediated” reality.

Close-ups of the *Führer*, eschewed throughout *The Victory of Faith*, are employed sparingly in *Triumph*, with a very deliberate effect. They are compositionally uniform, showing Hitler from the shoulders up, and shot from a low angle, with all of the material and symbolic power dynamics that this implies. In the back of the shot, nothing but the pale and empty sky, increasing the sense of Hitler’s elevation – indeed, it is as if he were speaking from a mountaintop. This close-up only appears at moments of oratorical fervour, when Hitler is attempting to exert his power directly over the bodies and minds of his audience. Specifically, we find it at the precise moment that his speech invokes the unity of the German nation.[[441]](#footnote-441)

The first time such a shot appears is during Hitler’s address to the Labour Service (a platoon of spade-wielding workers dressed up like stormtroopers). These men perform a roll call, in which a leader asks his fellows “Comrade, where are you from?” As each man responds with his province of origin (“From Friesland…From Bavaria…From the Kaisersthul”) we cut to a close-up of the speaker. These shots are markedly similar to the presentation of the villagers in *The Blue Light*. The first three close-ups show the speakers turning their heads from screen-right to screen-left as they give their answer. This is followed by two successive profile shots, one oriented to the right and one to the left. The latter workman turns his head to face forward, and a short pan shifts us to the right, where another worker makes the reverse movement, turning his head from straight-on to a left-facing profile. The sequence is concluded with three more profiles facing left to right, navigated by a cut followed by another quick pan. Once again, we see a combination of editing, camera movement and careful orchestration of the *mise-en-scéne* employed to assert equivalence and uniformity across a range of individual faces – in this instance, functioning to unite the various regions of Germany under the sign of a single master race.

The roll call ends with a mass pronouncement – “One people, one *Führer*, one Reich, one Germany.” On the word *Führer* the shot cuts to Hitler, gazing down with stern approval. The next cut shows us a metal sculpture of the Nazi eagle (arranged at the reverse angle to Hitler as in a conventional shot/reverse-shot pattern, as if the two were engaged in conversation), and finally to the Nazi flag flapping in the breeze. Just as the dissolve in *The Blue Light* turned the face of Junta to crystal, thereby converting it into the idol around which the village’s racial community could cohere, so this short sequence binds the face of Hitler, the image of the eagle and the swastika directly to the pronounced unity of the German nation. As Schmōlders notes, the desired effect of this juxtaposition is elucidated by the Hitler Youth leader Baldur von Schirach in his preface to *The Führer’s Countenance*, a book of 16 portraits of Hitler by his personal photographer Heinrich Hoffmann, released in 1939:

When we read in these dear features, we learn of our cares and our determination regarding our existence; and moved and shamed we recognize the face of a man who never wanted to think of himself…It is this selfless, exclusive thought devoted only to Germany, which here impressed itself onto *the* German face par excellence, so that in the future no German will be able to recall his homeland without seeing the Führer’s face before him.[[442]](#footnote-442)

Whist the faces of the individual workers are connected with various regional identities, it is Hitler alone who is identified with the nation of Germany, and by implication, the German race. This is obviously not because his face embodies ideal “Germanic” or “Nordic” features, but rather because it performs the “despotic” function described above. Hitler’s face is the bearer of the gaze which organizes the nation into hierarchical racial categories; it is around the image of his face that the faces of all others cluster and cohere into an imagined racial community. Again, in *Hitler in Ourselves*, Picard describes Hitler’s face (we might rather say, his “faciality”) in terms that are shockingly redolent of Deleuze and Guattari:

If you see the face just as it appears: an empty zero, an empty white surface, which has two black dots where humans have their eyes, and with a black line where the mouth should be, if you have it before you just like this, then it stands there like one of those white plates with black lines and dots, mounted on a pole by the side of the road to warn drivers of the abyss behind the bend of the road…[[443]](#footnote-443)

The schematic arrangement of “white wall” and “black holes” compassed within the border of an empty zero; the air of foreboding, of “*destiny*”, hinting at a future catastrophe – Hitler emerges here as the very blueprint of the “terrestrial signifying despotic face”, the face of “subjectification”, where a people may look to conform themselves to the signifying order handed down by hegemonic power.

The relativity of these two concepts (the ideal racial face and the despotic physiognomical face) is on show throughout *Triumph of the Will*. Throughout the film, Hitler’s face is always active, mobile, approaching and receding in the manner described above, whilst the faces of the people are held static within the frame, or else performing to patterns established by the sequence of editing and obviously choreographed in advance. The latter are designed to be read, to be consumed by the eye, to present to the viewer the spotless ideal of German racial purity. The former, by refusing to open itself to such scrutiny, increases its power as the face about and against which the unity of all others is organised. Crowds are shot from above, but when individual faces are picked out, they are generally filmed from below, partaking of the same elevation as Hitler himself, lifted out of the mass to stand as the symbol of that mass. Their eyes, however, are directed upwards, following the vector of their perpetually extended arms as they reach out past their faces towards that of the leader, on his mountaintop. A hierarchical interfacial relation is constructed and maintained throughout the film, with the face Hitler as the always-distant, perpetually receding centre around which the ideal face of the German nation coalesces.

***Jud Süß***

In the films of Leni Riefenstahl, we find the elaboration of a physiognomical system in which the image of an idealised “Nordic” face is shaped and coalesced around the “despotic” face of the leader, whose visage represents the power which orders faces into hierarchical categories. The goal of such a system is to validate Nazi racial theory by creating an ideal physiognomic object, a face which, in the words of Kracauer, “involuntarily betrays the close relationship of soul and blood.”[[444]](#footnote-444) From the perspective of an overall system of Nazi racial physiognomics, however, this was only half of the task. It was also necessary to address the face of the other, those faces which the system sought to degrade or else attempt to exclude entirely from its projected community. Nazi racial physiognomy proposed a hierarchy, in which a range of hypostatized racial faces were associated with sets of moral characteristics, with the noble “Nordic” type at the top and the lower “Mediterranean”, “Baltic” and “Asiatic” types distributed below. The lowest species of face, though, was one which could not even be encompassed by this hierarchy, because its supposed essence defied the terms of the visuality upon which this order was established. We are speaking, of course, of the so-called “Jewish face”; for the Nazis, remarkable for its capacity to dissimulate, to shape-shift, to be otherwise than how it appears. The Jewish face is the other of the Nordic ideal, not simply in the sense that it completes a list of binary oppositions (light/dark, upright/protracted/ hard/soft etc.), but in that it embodies an entirely different semiology of the face – characterised by mutability, concealment and resistance to the despotic power of the physiognomic gaze.

For this reason, the face of the Jew becomes the focal point for all of the irrational stresses and antinomies of the Nazi racial-physiognomic system. On the one hand, nothing is less equivocal than the caricatured representation of the Jew which appears ubiquitously in the propaganda of the time. At the same time, though, the Nazis never seem to be fully confident in their ability to identify the Jewish person. The full resources of their physiognomic system are applied to the task with neurotic fervour, and still certainty eludes them – the “Jew” slips perpetually through their nets, precisely because it represents a blind spot which cannot be covered, no matter how far the physiognomic observer turns. This anxiety is reflected in the representation of Jews in films of the time.

With respect to the ideal, Nordic face, the goal of Riefenstahl’s cinema was to present it so that it “spoke for itself”, so that its essence seemed to reveal itself without any need for conscious interpretation or contextual support. In the case of the “Jew”, however, this would never be enough – it was necessary at all times to supplement the image with a controlling discourse focussed upon correcting and training the gaze of the naïve spectator. Veit Harlan’s *Jud Süß* (1940),[[445]](#footnote-445) is an example of such an exercise.

The film is set in 18th century Württemberg, the story beginning with newly minted Duke Karl Alexander (Heinrich George) arranging to make a loan from Frankfurt moneylender Joseph Süß Oppenheimer (Ferdinand Marian) as part of a powerplay to wrest influence away from the provincial council. In spite of a long-standing edict banning Jews from entering the city of Stuttgart, Süß insists on travelling to meet the Duke in person. The Duke agrees, and so Süß cuts his hair, shaves his beard and sets aside his stereotypically Jewish attire, passing into the city “in disguise” as a good Christian citizen. Taking advantage of the Duke’s venality and greed, Süß gradually inveigles himself into a position of power, restructuring the local government so as to concentrate wealth and influence in his hands, corrupting the morals of the local womenfolk and finally repealing the law barring Jews from the city. Ultimately, Süß’s rise is checked by his own hubris – an attempted coup backfires and, with the death of his patron the Duke, he is left defenceless against the vengeful citizenry, who try and hang him in short order. The film concludes with the reinstatement of the law against Jews entering Stuttgart, the council leader offering the following homily: “May our descendants hold firmly to this law, so they can save themselves much sorrow, and save their goods and lives, and the blood of their children and their children’s children.”

*Jud Süß* was a great box-office success. As Rentschler explains, the film was “the most popular release of the 1939-40 season. By 1943, 20.3 million viewers had seen it.”[[446]](#footnote-446) It represents a relatively rare instance of explicit antisemitism within the cinema of the time – in his classic study *Film in the Third Reich*, David Hull reckons that only four “major films” of the period deliberately set out to demonize the Jewish people – aside from the picture under discussion, he also cites *Robert und Bertram* (1939), *Die Rothschilds* (1940) and *The Eternal Jew* (1940 – more of which later), although he also mentions that isolated anti-Semitic scenes were sometimes inserted into films otherwise unconcerned with the subject.[[447]](#footnote-447) Narrative cinema under Nazism generally tended towards fantasy and escapism,[[448]](#footnote-448) or else the mediation of recognizably Fascist imagery and themes through historically or geographically displaced plots and settings (see *The Blue Light*, or Harlan’s own *Opfergang* (1944)). This does not mean that *Jud Süß* was not the explicit object of Nazi political strategy – quite the reverse. The picture was ultimately the product of a directive authored by the Propaganda Ministry in October or November 1938, requesting that film companies make special efforts to produce anti-Semitic material,[[449]](#footnote-449) and became a pet project of Goebbels, whose extensive involvement in the film’s production would in fact form the basis of Harlan’s successful defence at his denazification trial.[[450]](#footnote-450)(Harlan’s protest, like so many of his contemporaries, was the same as Süßhimself in the moments before his execution: “I’ve never been anything but a faithful servant of my sovereign.”)

According to the German critic Joseph Wolf,

It is no coincidence that the three anti-Semitic movies *Die Rothschilds*, *Jud Süß*, and *Der ewige Jude* were premiered precisely in 1940. Unquestionably Goebbels had those three films made and shown because of the planned and later actually executed “Final Solution of the Jewish Problem.”

The object of the film, he argues, was to provoke popular mistrust and resentment of Jewish people at a time when the Party was seeking to escalate its programme of expropriation, ghettoization, incarceration and murder. He continues:

At any rate, the movie *Jud Süß* was always shown to the “Aryan” population, especially in the East, when “resettlements” for the death camps were imminent…It is certain that the film was shown in order to incense in this way the “Aryan” population against Jews in the respective countries, and thus to choke off in the bud any possible help to them on the part of the people…[[451]](#footnote-451)

His view is corroborated by the writer and director Erwin Leiser, who observes that “at the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt former SS *Rottenführer* Stefan Baretzki admitted that the effect of showing the film was to instigate maltreatment of prisoners.”[[452]](#footnote-452) According to Hull, Heinrich Himmler “declared *Jud Süß* compulsory viewing for all military troops at home and on the front, as well as for the SS and the police.”[[453]](#footnote-453) We should be in no doubt, therefore, about the instrumental function of *Jud* *Süß* within Nazi racial policy. The film constitutes an attempt to control the perception of a hypostatized “race” of people; its implications trace directly to the genocide which was already in motion at the time of its release.

The rationale of the film constitutes a project of visual training, of the kind hinted at in the works of Günther, Clauss, and even in a sense Balázs. The aim – to teach the audience to perceive the “real face” of the Jew.[[454]](#footnote-454) This rests on the notion that the face of the Jew is somehow different to that of any other "race", a supposition which has its roots in some of the fundamental concepts of Nazi racial theory. One of the most important political implications of eugenics (that aspect of it which lent it so well to incorporation into Nazi ideology) was the biologization of nationhood. For Günther, a nation is not a geographic, political or cultural entity, but a “national body” in the most literal sense, composed of a number of different races (or “bloods”), one of which, whether by historico-mythic connection to the “soil” or genetic “superiority” has a claim to hegemony over all others. The task of the state, then, is to cultivate the flourishing of the superior race through bio-political measures. Viewed from this perspective, the Jews constituted an aberration, originating from outside of Europe, and without a homeland of their own. In fact, for Günther the Jews did not even constitute a race *per se*, but a peculiar kind of nation – scattered, vagrant, a country without a “soil”:

The Jews are a nation, and, like other nations, may belong to several religions; like other nations, too, they are made up of several races. The two races which are, so to say, the foundation of the Jewish nation are, as was said above, the Hither Asiatic and the Oriental. Besides these there are lesser strains of the Hamitic, Nordic, Inner Asiatic and Negro races, and heavier strains of the Mediterranean and East Baltic.[[455]](#footnote-455)

Of course, this is nothing more than a scientistic restatement of a commonplace anti-Semitic stereotype – the Jew as a rootless parasite, an invasive bacillus that drains the vitality of its host nation. But it does expose some of the logic which underlies the representation of the Jewish face in *Jud* *Süß*. The Jew, according to Günther, is not a race, or a religion but a kind of anti-nation, a nation defined by the lack of the characteristics which define a nation in his terms (i.e., an ethnic “homeland”). In other words, the Jew lacks precisely the qualities of racial homogeneity and blood-and-soil continuity which are supposed to be detectable in the ideal faces of the Nordic race. What, then, does Günther expect to find in the face of the Jew, except the very negativity that his theory has already ascribed to it?

It follows from this that the face of the Jew in Nazi cinema should be defined by its lack of content, by its capacity to dissimulate and self-transform. At the same time, the face of the Jew always remains paradoxically exposed to “those who know”. Within minutes of his arrival at the court in Stuttgart, Süß’s disguise is penetrated by the discerning eye of the young clerk Faber (Malte Jaeger), who immediately exclaims *sotto voce*: “That Mr Oppenheimer from Frankfurt is a Jew!” This disparity reveals the arbitrary power that lies behind the representation of Süß in the film – to those in control of the image, his appearance is no mystery. Only the naïve and the innocent are in danger, and it is the responsibility of the initiate to protect them.

As several critics have observed, the master-technique in *Jud* *Süß*, as well as in Nazi cinema more generally, is the dissolve.[[456]](#footnote-456) A form of transition between scenes, a dissolve blends the remains of the previous image with the coalescing fragments of the next, blurring the two together with much more suggestion and ambiguity than a clean cut. As well as stressing graphic similarities, the dissolve suggests hidden connections and secret identities; in its peeling away of one image to reveal another underneath, it can be said to resemble, as Jennifer Hansen puts it in her discussion of *The Eternal Jew*, “a ritual of unmasking,”[[457]](#footnote-457) the exposure of the “truth” that lies behind a false appearance. In *Jud* *Süß*, each dissolve elucidates a binary in which one term is presented as ideological veneer, and the other the truth of things. So, in the film’s first dissolve, the insignia of the Duke of Württemberg blends into the Hebrew sign which hangs outside Süß’s shop in the Frankfurt ghetto, foreshadowing the infiltration of the Duchy by Jewish influence, whilst a later transition slides from a pile of gold that Süß pours onto the Duke’s desk into a room of ballet dancers, symbolizing the decadence that the former’s wealth will bring to the court of the latter.

The most remarkable dissolves, however, are saved for Süß himself. Before leaving the Frankfurt ghetto, he declares his intention to shave his beard and disguise himself as a Christian. The transformation is represented by a dissolve which also flips the orientation of Süß’s head from screen-left to screen-right, reinforcing the about-face in his appearance. At the film’s conclusion, another dissolve performs the reverse transition. This time the alignment of the two images is much more consistent, emphasizing their identity, as opposed to the act of deception which distinguishes between, as Marc Ferro puts it, “his ghetto face (which does not lie about his subhuman nature), and his city face (which is no less harmful despite its deceptive appearance).”[[458]](#footnote-458)

The function of the dissolve in *Jud* *Süß* is to represent the action of the “educated” fascist gaze (as embodied by the clerk Faber) penetrating the disguise of the “assimilated” Jew and seeing through to his “true” identity beneath. The usefulness of the dissolve for such purposes, however, depends upon the assumption that meaning will only ever flow one way, that the hierarchy between false appearance and true revelation will remain stable. The technique of the dissolve, however, is always haunted by its potentially limitless reversibility, by the notion that instead of presenting us with an act of “unmasking”, it instead shows the absolute fungibility of two images deprived of their grounding in embodiment. In order for the dissolve to do its ideological work, the film must take measures to prevent this slippage by validating the “authenticity” of the “ghetto face” over the deceptive “city face.”

This “authenticity” is purportedly established by the early scene in the Frankfurt ghetto, where we see Süß amongst his fellow Jews, all of whom are played by the same actor. This is Werner Krauss, a sort of Fascist Lon Chaney, famed for his ability to transform his appearance, according to the director Willi Frost, “the last great chameleon, a genius who has replaced disguise with metamorphosis.”[[459]](#footnote-459) In the course of this preposterous sequence, Krauss’s turns include Süß’s secretary Levy, as well as both sides of a conversation between a man named Itzak and a local Rabbi, who leans out of his bedroom window alongside a scantily-dressed young lady by the name of Rebecca (sadly, Krauss’ chameleonic talents do not stretch as far as this last role.)

Krauss, a celebrity whose fame exceeded that of the film’s star Ferdinand Marian, would have been known and recognised by the domestic audience, and as such, his performance is another deliberately transparent deception. The fact that Krauss is behind each of these different roles is offered up to the audience as one of the scene’s attractions – the chance to appreciate a bravura performance simultaneously flatters the audience’s visual acuity. Again, a fake equivalence is established between the faces of the various figures which Krauss portrays, as the viewer is encouraged to see through his various guises and recognise the consistency of the “Jewish identity” beneath. At the same time, the identity that is revealed is that of the face-changer, the “last chameleon”, a figure defined solely by his ability to manufacture and exchange appearances. The “ghetto face” which is supposed to support the hierarchy implied by the film’s use of dissolves is itself ultimately groundless, determined not by a principle of identity but one of change and deceit. The obvious irony of this, of course, is that Krauss himself is in no way Jewish by any conceivable definition of the term – the face of an actual self-identified Jew would be utterly unthinkable within the context of a Nazi “entertainment” film. This prohibition marks the limits of drama as a means of communicating the system of Nazi physiognomy, the point at which the risks incurred by theatrical ambiguity outweigh the potential rhetorical power of the medium. If the faces of ordinary Jewish people are to appear on the screens of Nazi film, it will necessarily be under quite different circumstances.

Repeatedly in *Jud* *Süß*, the face of the Jew is foregrounded as a potentially deceptive surface, only to be immediately abolished, or dissolved, by the penetrating physiognomic gaze. What is revealed, however, is not the “truth”, but rather the principle of changeability itself, embodied by the fundamental reversibility of the technique of the dissolve and the ludicrous performance of the “chameleon” Krauss. The precipitous rapidity with which this operation is carried out (that is, the instantaneity with which the Jew is “unmasked”) is evidence enough that what we are witnessing here is not any kind of revelation but simply the neurotic oscillation between the two poles of the fascist anti-Semitic stereotype, amounting to nothing more than an empty restatement of the power of the physiognomic gaze against its inability to read any content whatsoever into the faces of those it wishes to subject. In order for the Jewish face to be read as the fascist wishes to read it (simultaneously as the site of a great deception and a transcendental signifier of racial identity), the face itself must be withdrawn, concealed or dissolved, or else presented in a context so totally overdetermined that its intended significance admits no ambiguity.

**A Hermeneutics of Domination**

We see this logic carried to its fulfilment in Fritz Hippler’s 1940 “documentary” *The Eternal Jew* (*Der ewige Jude*),[[460]](#footnote-460) the miserable nadir of the physiognomic film aesthetic. A litany of antisemitic slurs and pseudohistory, it was produced as an explicit attempt to reinforce public support for the regime’s policy towards Jewish populations, both in Germany and in occupied territory. The film takes to form of a kind of informational collage, splicing decontextualized snippets of footage from various sources with movie clips and crude animations, all presided over by an imperious voiceover. Its purpose is perfectly transparent – to portray Jewish people as disease-carriers, inveterate criminals and habitual deceivers, unfit to exist in the new society being constructed under the Third Reich. To this end, *The Eternal Jew* offers its audience a course of perceptual training, supposed to teach German citizens to see through the Jewish façade. In Hansen’s words, “the viewer is literally bombarded by faces, by long banning shots of Jewish faces in a Polish ghetto, by the faces of rabbis, yeshiva students, and peddlers, and by ambiguously sophisticated faces at Berlin parties.” Here, the dualism of *Jud* *Süß* is on display again, establishing the distinction between the “assimilated” Jew who attempts to blend in with European society and the authentic “ghetto” Jew who openly displays his “true *morgenländisches Wesen* (oriental nature.)””[[461]](#footnote-461) And once again, it is the technique of the dissolve that is supposed to perform the act of “unmasking”, which discovers the one kind of “Jewish face” hiding behind the other. Rows of men in orthodox Jewish garb gradually lose their beards and yarmulkes, until the subjects stand smiling in what the voiceover calls “Western European” clothes. Only the faces remain the same, evidence of the fundamental truth that lies behind all attempts at disguise. “These physiognomies,” the narrator intones, “immediately refute the liberal theories about the equality of all who bear a human countenance.” At the same time, the contradictions manifest in *Jud* *Süß* also recur – what is supposed to be visibly self-evident must in fact be decoded, and the purported Jewish “essence” turns out to be no essence at all: “The hair, beard, skullcap and caftan make the Eastern Jew recognisable to everyone. Should he remove them, only sharp-eyed people can spot his racial origins. An essential trait of the Jew is that he always tries to hide his origin when among non-Jews.”

Ultimately, *The Eternal Jew* is an instructive artefact not because it restates the Nazi-physiognomic tropes which we have observed elsewhere, but because it deploys them in such a way as to leave us in no doubt – behind the elaborate hermeneutic shell games of physiognomy is nothing more than the cold word of command. The innate spiritual-physiological order that physiognomy purports to discover in the face must in the end be asserted and upheld through violence, and what begins as a supposed refinement of the visual sense concludes with its total subordination to the voice of an authority which has already done all our seeing for us. Once again, what is packaged as a programme of optical training is in fact in invitation (or a demand) to the viewer to identify themselves with a particular subject position – as a part of a community of faces which is organised not according to the expression of some organic principle, but by a *fiat* delivered from the mountaintop of the absolute despot. The true structuring function of the face in fascist media is not even that it pretends to reveal the determining influence of the category of race, but that it lays out a whole system of social relations – the incestuous warmth of in-group recognition, the paranoid fear of the other, complete prostration to state power – as a series of face-to-face encounters. And what could be more intuitive, more natural, more human than that?

The story of *The Eternal Jew*’s distribution is a parable of this dynamic of power and submission. Upon its cinematic release, its histrionic cruelty proved to be too much even for the domestic market of Nazi Germany. As Hansen explains, “No more than approximately one million people actually paid to see the film, and Goebbels therefore quickly turned to non-commercial distribution.” The film, she continues, was shown to captive audiences, including members of the Hitler Youth at Sunday screenings, and also “special units of the SS who were involved in the implementation of the Final Solution.”[[462]](#footnote-462) A film like *Jud* *Süß* constituted an attempt to package the physiognomic training program as a frothy entertainment; *The Eternal Jew*, on the other hand, demonstrates the regime’s need to apply this tool directly to key sites for the reproduction and implementation of Nazi ideology. Where illusion and sophistry could not be trusted, people must simply be told what a face shows and how to see it.

To consider the aesthetics of Nazi physiognomy at such length is neither a pleasurable nor an edifying experience. Nonetheless, it is in two main regards a salutary exercise. Firstly, we see in the example of Nazi Germany one of the earliest instances of the face’s absorption into a mass multi-media network, in which different mediatised representations of the face (i.e. the photographic, the cinematic) operate concurrently, both in concert and in opposition. In this sense, it is a useful case study of what can be done with the face once it has moved fully into the space demarked by modern technologies of vision and the rise of the mass audience – the meanings it can be made to embody, and the uses to which it can be put. At the same time, though, this takes place in the context of a society organised quite differently to the democracies which developed in Europe and North America following the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s. Nazi Germany was an intensified instance of Foucault’s disciplinary society, a social order built around an arrangement of institutions designed to produce a body of docile citizens through a concerted process of education and training. At the centre of this structure was a central source of power, from which all authority flowed outwards – the *Führer*. Conversely, in the neoliberal democracies of the late-twentieth century and beyond, power is distributed through decentralized networks of capital, information, influence and so on, and expresses its coercive force increasingly through what Deleuze called the modality of “control” – systems of access and interdiction, entitlement and dispossession, which are no longer concerned with shaping the subject in the same way as the disciplinary mechanism.[[463]](#footnote-463) In this sense, Nazi Germany shows us a version of the face which is the same but different, less oriented towards individuality than we have become accustomed to and more concerned with expressing and consolidating group identities. This demonstrates in turn that the face is a political technology with several possible forms and functions. Deleuze and Guattari were wrong to claim that “the face is a politics”; the face can serve different political imperatives in different instances, and to fail to appreciate this fact is to be blind to the full range of its potential applications.[[464]](#footnote-464)

Secondly, the examples we have seen in the preceding chapter stress one of the face’s most common and significant applications – as a political technology through which the right to life is distributed, and simultaneously by which this distribution is naturalised. The issues of who gets to be human, in what degree, and what claims their humanity has upon us are, it seems, never far from the problem of the face and its constitution, its properties, its meanings. Faces are knit deep into our everyday experiences of affect and intersubjectivity, and are inextricably related to many of the truths to which we must hold the fiercest, if we are to go on living past this breath and the next. Their power to render intuitive what ought to be the subject of the most concerted political contestation is accordingly vast. Vigilance and scepticism, therefore, are demanded wherever a face is presented to us as the tribune of any human collective, a scrupulous attention to what is presumed and what is occluded in the manner of its framing.

**Chapter Five: The End of the Face and the Return of Masks**

It is crucial to realize that the face as an extension of a system, here a digital computation system, inherits the characteristics and capabilities of that system.

Arthur Elsenaar, *Facial Hacking: The Twisted Logic of Electro-Facial Choreography*

**Foucault’s Two Faces**

In the preface to *The Order of Things*, his “archaeological” investigation into the structural foundations of European thought, Michel Foucault famously proclaimed “the end of man.” “It is comforting…and a source of profound relief,” he wrote, “to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form.” [[465]](#footnote-465) Returning to this thought at the end of book, he chose to illustrate it with an image that has become one of the emblems of twentieth-century anti-humanism:

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager than man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.[[466]](#footnote-466)

The description of the figure of “man” as the sketch of a face scratched into a sandy beach, gently annulled by the incoming tide, was preceded by another facial figuration, less often quoted and more violent:

Rather than the death of God – or, rather, in the wake of that death and in a profound correlation with it – what Nietzsche’s thought heralds is the end of his murderer; it is the explosion of man’s face in laughter, and the return of masks.[[467]](#footnote-467)

These are phrases to conjure with, luminous and gnomic. Nevertheless, they pose certain problems for Foucault’s modern readers. Their apocalyptic tone, not to mention the glee with which the author seems to welcome the eradication of “man,” are in a certain sense out of keeping with the rest of the text. *The Order of Things* is, after all, not so much a direct attack on humanism as an ethical system founded on the presumed ontological privilege of “man”, but rather, as Béatrice Han-Pile points out, a more circumspect deconstruction of the post-Kantian hypostatisation of the human subject as “the new historical *a priori* that underlies our comprehension.”[[468]](#footnote-468) For the purposes of his argument in *The Order of Things*, Foucault sees the essence of the Kantian revolution in philosophy as the establishment of the figure of “man” – or rather, the “transcendental” mental properties by virtue of which he is able to form representations of the world in which he exists – as the foundation of knowledge (as opposed to the preceding Classical era, which held that representation was in itself the fundamental means by which knowledge was formed, regardless of its roots in the transcendental properties of “man”).[[469]](#footnote-469)

Foucault argued that this “Copernican” shift in the epistemic structure of European thought contained a fundamental contradiction. It transforms man into what he called the “empirico-transcendental doublet” – a figure whose characteristics are simultaneously the transcendental basis which makes knowledge possible *and* the empirical object of knowledge itself.[[470]](#footnote-470) “Man” became, as he put it, a “demiurge,” existing both within the empirical and the historical, and outside of these domains as the very condition of their possibility.[[471]](#footnote-471) Any system of thought which attempts to ground itself in the properties of this figure will therefore be sundered by this original paradox, depending as it must for its consistency on this fantastical figure who is at once an eternal, transhistorical being and the finite, mortal object of history.

Foucault’s anti-humanism – encapsulated in his pronouncement of the “end of man” and the erasure of the human face – is therefore primarily an epistemological critique before it arrives at the level of the ethical, the social, the political and so on. If, as Han-Pile suggests, *The Order of Things* contains an attack on “fallacious normative ideals focused on the idea of authenticity as the return to man’s true nature,” then Foucault is content to leave it largely implicit.[[472]](#footnote-472) This means that there is something inescapably confusing in the text’s valedictory shift “from case studies illustrating the failures of [forms of knowledge founded in the transcendental human subject] to apodictic claims about such failures being necessary.”[[473]](#footnote-473) The book has been conducting its argument largely at the level of epistemic structures, but these prophetic claims seem to be directed at the domain, as Han-Pile so rightly puts it, of “normative ideals.” In short, no one ever got excited about the deconstruction of the “empirico-transcendental doublet” as the foundation of the modern episteme. The obliteration of “man” as the emblematic figure whose characteristics provide the only solid basis for conceptions of justice, systems of ethics, notions of the good society, and so on? This is an entirely more invigorating proposition.

And yet also exponentially more problematic and troubling. If the end of “man” means the death of the human in this broader sense, then what will be the collateral damage? Should anything of it be preserved? Can it be? These kinds of questions manifest themselves in the text as a basic ambivalence, which Han-Pile describes as follows: “on the one hand, the withdrawal of man as an episteme is used to predict the doom of the humanist conception of man; on the other, the demise of such conceptions is seen as indicative of the imminent death of “man” [in the epistemic sense].”[[474]](#footnote-474) The missing term here, it seems, is historical agency. Does the empirical determine the ethico-ontological, or the other way around? How are these processes motivated? This confusion, as apparently irreducible as Foucault’s “empirico-transcendental” dilemma, is expressed through the two images of the face.

Obviously, the face in general signifies the figure of “man” as the “empirico-transcendental doublet”, in both cases at the moment of its demise. Otherwise, however, Foucault’s two faces are quite different. The face-in-the-sand passage is a tale of inexorable, impersonal historical process; nobody, one or many, need lift a finger to hasten its consummation, and to resist is as futile as opposing the ocean tides. There is no pain, and no struggle. The total obliteration of the face ensures its instant forgetting, and though we are offered no suggestion as to what might succeed it, at least we can be sure that we will be incapable of regretting its passing. In the other passage, however, the human face shatters in a burst of ludic violence, exploded by a gale of Nietzschean laughter. It is a destructive and painful act, and, relative to its counterpart, stands in a much more complicated relationship to the idea of volition. The end of the face, in this case, seems to require that “man” becomes aware of his own absurdity to the extent that he is moved to fits of cataclysmic mirth. But how does this realisation come about? Who convinces him? And what comes next? Here, we are left not with an oblivion of “lone and level sands”, but the far more ominous “return of masks.” What would it mean to replace the face with a mask, and in what sense would this constitute a return? The image of the face, eye-to-eye with its own destruction, is the embodiment of all these questions and more, crystallising every doubt and promise that assails us as we stand on the threshold of posthumanity.

**“If human beings have a destiny…”**

Some fourteen years later, the theme of the end of the face was taken up once more, by Deleuze and Guattari in their *A Thousand Plateaus*. Theirs is a more explicitly activist program than Foucault’s, relocating the problem from the realm of epistemology to that of politics, and more engaged with their predecessor’s later work on power and subject formation than with his archaeologies of knowledge. Accordingly, they respond to Foucault’s ambivalence with wonderful clarity. So far as Deleuze and Guattari are concerned, it is not just our task to deconstruct the face, but our calling:

[If] human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine, not by returning to animality, nor even by returning to the head, but by quite spiritual and special becomings-animal, by strange true becomings that get past the wall and get out of the black holes, that make *faciality* traits themselves finally elude the organization of the face – freckles dashing toward the horizon, hair carried off by the wind, eyes you traverse instead of seeing yourself in or gazing into in those glum face-to-face encounters between signifying subjectivities.[[475]](#footnote-475)

What the authors are recommending here with such marvellous élan is the eradication of the system of “faciality” (*visagéité*). “Faciality” was discussed at greater length in the introduction, but for the sake of clarity a short recap will be helpful. The term describes a general semiotic system which binds together *signifiance* (the capacity to signify, depicted as a “white wall”) with *subjectification* (the production of a subject, figured as a “black hole”). A face can be any visual plane wherein the capacity to signify meaning is associated with the presence of a subject who is responsible for those meanings, precisely in the sense that we consider facial expressions to refer directly to the individual who “makes” them.[[476]](#footnote-476) These two factors are, as our authors see it, mutually regulative – that is to say, there are certain kinds of significations which are held to be appropriate for certain kinds of subject, and vice versa. “Faces,” therefore, “are not basically individual: they define zones of frequency or probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate significations.” In other words, faciality links expression with subjectivity in order that one might police the other. Our range of legitimate or legible expressivity is defined by the kind of subject that we are (“child, woman, mother, man, father, boss, teacher, police officer”), whilst the kind of subject that we are predefines the forms of expression we can legitimately exhibit.

This process is not organic, and it doesn’t occur by chance. Rather, according to our authors, faciality is engendered by “very specific assemblages of power” in order to control the affects and identities of subjects.[[477]](#footnote-477) It accomplishes this through two related functions. Firstly, by the production of individualized faces within a binary system. So, within the system of faciality, a certain arrangement of “traits” corresponds to the identity of a man, and another to that of a woman, “a rich person or a poor one, an adult or a child, a leader or a subject, “an x *or* a y.””[[478]](#footnote-478) Secondly, by defining a certain bandwidth within which faces are able to “pass” according to this binary system, establishing the point at which a face no longer falls within the established categories. Not only does this allow for the location and regulation of deviance, but it also enables the development of the system of faciality to encompass emergent facial “types”, as Deleuze and Guattari explain:

At every moment, the machine rejects faces that do not conform, or seem suspicious…it is necessary to produce successive divergence-types of deviance for everything that eludes biunivocal relationships, and to establish binary relations between what is accepted on first choice and what is only tolerated on second, third choice, etc…A ha! It’s not a man and it’s not a woman, so it must be a trans-vestite (*sic*)…At any rate, you’ve been recognized, the abstract machine has you inscribed in its overall grid.[[479]](#footnote-479)

Faciality, then, is a means through which a society can be arranged according to a visual system which both distinguishes individuals and orders them hierarchically by class, race, gender, sexuality and so on. In this sense, it represents a generalized form of the kind of institutional structure of subjectification described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* and throughout his work on disciplinary power generally. Viewed in this regard, the face represents a fantasy/nightmare in which disciplinary power has been abstracted from all institutions and inscribed within the “natural” body itself, written on the face of every man, woman, child, police officer and so on. We’ve seen this kind of thing before – in the national galleries of Sander, Dircksen and Günther. It lives on in the databases which underwrite contemporary facial recognition and identification systems.

For Deleuze and Guattari, then, to dismantle the face means to disarticulate signifiance from subjectification and vice versa, sending “faciality traits” scattering like beads from a broken necklace and freeing the human subject to seek out “strange true becomings.” Let us tear apart this sigil of fake universality, they cry, let us crush this tool of coercive normalization and state power! “Find your black holes and white walls, know your faces; it is the only way you will be able to dismantle them and draw your lines of flight.”[[480]](#footnote-480) Which seems to be a way of saying: Know how you are a prisoner of your face. See the ways in which the meanings of your subjectivity and the subjectivity of your meanings are determined by a broader mechanism of normalization and control, observe this relationship, learn how it works, then torque it, pervert it, fuck with it until it breaks. “Only on your face and at the bottom of your black hole ad upon your white wall will you be able to set faciality traits free like birds.”[[481]](#footnote-481) Only by pursuing the logic of faciality to its extremities will it be possible to transcend it. But transcend to what?

Both Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari are circumspect when it comes to describing what might come after the face. This is salutary. In both instances, the face represents a system of knowledge and/or representation so fundamental that to simultaneously stand within it and see without it would be impossible. What is essential, however, and what the highly theoretical nature of these writers’ projects perhaps prevents, is to consider the political conditions under which this transcendence of the face might take place. Because if the end of the face is to be a liberation, then it must also be recognised that no liberation never went uncontested. If it is not so easy to state positive goals, then at the least we must be able to identify our enemies. Otherwise the call to dismantle the face is at terminal risk of co-optation, of being absorbed into spectacle and fashion, or else channelled towards new modes of subjection.

**Face Politics**

The urgency of this kind of work is demonstrated by one of the most significant recent interventions into the topic, Jenny Edkins’ 2015 book *Face Politics*, an impressively interdisciplinary account of contemporary thinking on the face across neuroscience, medicine, the humanities and the visual arts. Its analysis is both detailed and wide-ranging, skilfully interweaving the author’s thoughts on Möbius syndrome, Antony Gormley, mirror neurons, the UK riots of 2011, and much more. In defining the stakes of her project, Edkins takes her cue directly from Deleuze and Guattari, asking “what would dismantling the face entail, in practical terms?...Is it already taking place? Is it a politics that is to be desired, a better politics, a progressive politics?”[[482]](#footnote-482) Her goal, in responding to these questions, is to put some flesh on the elegant bones of Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari’s theories, to juxtapose the idea of the end of the face with some concrete examples of how faces are made and unmade in the contemporary world.

Edkins follows Deleuze and Guattari in seeing the face as a political technology, or indeed, as we described it in the Introduction, a “technology of the human itself.” Its function is to produce and naturalise “the human” as a specific form of political subject, which she describes as the notion of the person as “first of all separate.”[[483]](#footnote-483) In short, by making it appear as if individuation, expression, subjectification and so on are processes which occur *solely within the body*, rather than through processes of interpersonal mediation, it suggests an account of human nature which sees each person as a self-sustaining atom, “separate, distinct and whole.”[[484]](#footnote-484) This notion of the human creature as a primordially individualised being implies in turn a certain model of the political or the social – that is, the idea that “sociality comes from distinct individuals getting together.”[[485]](#footnote-485) “Face politics”, as Edkins conceives it, therefore amounts inevitably to some version of social contract theory, wherein a certain number of independent persons come together and agree, on the basis of a certain distribution of rights and forfeitures, to form a community. There is of course an implicit negativity to the notion of political community so considered; depending on the theorist in question (Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau, for instance), there are specified freedoms which the individual must give up in order to enjoy the fruits of social existence, ostensibly personal liberties which are stamped with the imprimatur of “nature”, as opposed to the artificiality of the social constraints which act against them. The prerogatives of the self, for better or worse, are instinctual and universal, whilst practices of social organisation are contrived and contingent. Needless to say, were human existence conceived as a primordially collective condition (a state that Edkins calls “primary indivisibility” and “singular plural being”) that is then “artificially” segmented into individuals through the process of social development, our accounting of the costs and benefits attending the formation of political communities would be quite different.

Edkins somewhat summarily relates this model of the subject to a cultural lineage which she traces from the “beginnings of portraiture in the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods”, which first associated facial display with wealth, power, cultural prestige and all of the other accoutrements of the quote-unquote autonomous individual. At the societal level, meanwhile, she traces the development of face politics “through Hobbes’ Leviathan and the social contract to conquest, colonialism, nationalism, war and the modern liberal democratic state: individualism, capitalism, consumerism – and intractable inequality.”[[486]](#footnote-486) This might seem like rather a hefty charge sheet to brandish against the poor old face, and indeed, this tendency to associate the face with a totalised, monolithic politics is one of the weaknesses of Edkins’ analysis (to be discussed further in due course). Nevertheless, there is nothing in this that is fundamentally incompatible with the analysis of the face that we have thus far been pursuing. In the course of this project, we have endeavoured to describe the face as a technology which seeks to make certain politically tendentious formations of the human subject self-evident at the level of personal experience, and have studied various moments in the history of its relationship with technological media as a way of getting some purchase on its concrete uses. Edkins advances a similar project, dedicating the bulk of her analysis to critiquing the relationship between the face and the human subject as it exists in face politics. On the one hand, she demonstrates the ways in which the objectification of the face as the emblem of the primordially individuated subject is produced by practices within, for instance, the areas of photography, political discourse and evolutionary biology. At the same time, she also explains the ways in which this model of faciality has been challenged from within neurobiology by discoveries such as mirror neurons, which allow us to understand facial expressions not as the internalised productions of a monadic subject but the result of intersubjective neurological mimicry. So doing, she helps to show how challenges to the dominant account of face politics emerge not only from the humanities and the social sciences but also from the fields which have traditionally played an extremely powerful role in naturalizing certain normative conceptions of what faces are and how they relate to subjectivity.

However, in adapting her theoretical framework from Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari, Edkins’ work also contracts some of their flaws. Like Deleuze and Guattari, she is frustratingly vague both about the conditions under which the face will be abolished and the question of what kinds of political or subjective forms will succeed it. Summing up her critique of face politics, Edkins writes:

We require the face…to sustain what we call social reality. It is there to enable us all to operate within a fantasmic figuration of the world as made up of separate, independent individuals, each with a core self behind the face that they present to the world.[[487]](#footnote-487)

As opposed to an “facial” ontology of the person as autonomous individual, Edkins offers an account of what she calls interchangeably the “primary indivisibility,” “interconnectedness” and “inseparability” of the subject.[[488]](#footnote-488) It is only because of the face, she argues, and the broader system of subjectification that it represents, that we are unable to perceive the manifold ways in which human life is defined, in the very first instance, by our sociality, our interdependence, our immersion in a world where the basic unit is not the self, but the collective. This might sound all well and good on first hearing, but as the semantic slippage between “indivisibility”, “interconnectedness” and “inseparability” indicates, the nature of this collective political subject remains substantively untheorized, aside from a tenuous excursion into the politics of unchoreographed dance and a lamentably posthumous penultimate-page reference to Emmanuel Levinas, whose theories she is otherwise content to do without. Rather than attempt to offer a rigorous account of what this subject without a face might resemble, or what kind of political practices or institutions it might require, she elects to leave the question open:

Can we live without it? Can we live without face? Or rather, can we face the abyss beneath? Perhaps we already do, and it is only our dominant contemporary politics that pretends, and makes us believe, that we cannot.[[489]](#footnote-489)

Whilst it is of course generally preferable to point out an aporia than it is to prematurely plug it with theories, in this case this approach creates an urgent ethical problem. We cannot very well advocate the “dismantling” of the face when we know neither what will replace it or whether this replacement will constitute any kind of improvement. Indeed, on this count some of Edkins’ vague formulations ought to give us considerable cause for concern. Why, for instance, should a collective political subject prove, *per se*, more liberatory than its individuated counterpart? Until the nature of the collective is specified, a term like the “singular plural being” could just as easily refer to the Fascist *völk* as a community of the emancipated.[[490]](#footnote-490) A flat, homogenized ontology may in principle serve the purposes of the oppressor as well as a stratified system of visual individuation.

**The Face is Not a Politics**

The root of these issues lies in Edkins’ uncritical acceptance of one of Deleuze and Guattari’s most questionable aphorisms: “The face is a politics.”[[491]](#footnote-491) So far as our authors are concerned, the face has *but one politics* – that of Western liberal-capitalist individualism. No matter its neatness and clarity, this claim is theoretically unfounded and practically limiting. For one thing, it licenses Deleuze and Guattari to make absurd orientalist pronouncements about “the history of the West” and “primitive cultures.”[[492]](#footnote-492) Faciality becomes a closed, monolithic system with an inside and an outside, a conception which simultaneously exaggerates and trivializes the task of those who would resist it. On the one hand, what hope is there of dismantling a semiotics which is identified point-for-point with the entire structure of neoliberal capitalism? On the other, when one’s enemy is so colossal and totalised there scarcely seems to be any necessity for critique, for the analysis of weakness and opportunity, the making of alliances and the identification of enemies. In short, to say that the “face is a politics” is to fail to recognize the face *as political*, which is to say, as a site of contestation where opposing forces struggle to impose their own account of its meaning and value. It results in an essentialising, Manichean approach to the issue which is totally incapable of addressing the needs and goals of groups who might actually want to do the work of engaging with the politics of faces.

We see this tendency in Edkins’ engagement with the experiences of the “faceless”, her catch-all term for the various social groupings whose physical, neurological or cultural differences place them outside of the general structures of inscription and recognition defined by faciality. Much like Deleuze and Guattari’s metaphorical appropriation of schizophrenia, Edkins attempts to extract a set of generalisable insights from the experience of, for instance, face-blindness or prosopagnosia, a neurological condition which impairs an individual’s ability to associate faces with identities. This turns the specificity of that experience, something which belongs exclusively to the prosopagnosiac, into the basis for a general transformation in how faces are perceived:

We would remain with the sense of non-recognition that the face blind experience – we would encounter each person anew each time, not as someone we knew and had seen before, but as someone fundamentally unknowable, missing, structured around a lack…We would accept that the signifying system – the social or symbolic order – was incomplete, itself structure around an impossibility. We would eschew the comfort that comes from concealing that incompleteness, from pretending that everything can be known, recognised, pinned down…Is a politics such as that possible?[[493]](#footnote-493)

The unintended consequence of this manoeuvre is to fetishize, sentimentalize and homogenize the experiences of the “faceless,” firstly by lumping them together on the generic “outside” of the symbolic order, and secondly by appropriating the contents of their experience as a model for a putatively universalist political program. The upshot is to foreclose the kind of difficult questions that people with face-blindness or autism or some form of visible facial difference might need to entertain as a necessary part of their political struggle, such as, is it preferable to struggle for recognition within the system of faciality, or to reject it altogether? Are there in fact certain aspects of faciality which ought to be extended, either as a transitional demand or as ends in themselves? Is the end of the face necessarily conducive to an improvement in the condition of the “faceless”, to their liberation? Any universalist political gesture which presumes the answer to these questions is necessarily exclusionary.

One of the goals of this project has been to show that the face can potentially serve within multiple different political programs. In our previous case-study of interwar Germany, we investigated the important symbolic role that the face played in a social order explicitly structured on the basis of collective racial identity, as opposed to liberal individualism. This may not seem like a particularly comforting finding in itself, but the underlying insight that the face is in fact politically polysemous is the necessary condition for a true critique of face politics. It allows us to see the face as the site of a set of tools and tactics which are contingent, contestable and potentially available for different actors to use towards different purposes. At this point, a whole array of new questions become legible. Do all elements of faciality necessarily serve the ends of oppression? Which parts of the face might we choose to affirm, and what must be destroyed? What tactics of facial representation or interpretation might lead us towards the positive transcendence of faciality? If these kinds of inquiries are not in themselves part of the process of “dismantling the face” as Deleuze and Guattari described it – the disarticulation of the faciality system into free-floating “faciality traits” – then it is hard to see what useful meaning that phrase could possess.

The recognition that the face is political, but not “a politics”, also greatly increases our ability to address the prospect of its erasure. Having done away with the idea that the face necessarily expresses a definite political project, we can see past Foucault’s indecision between the face in the sand that is washed away by the rising tide, and the face that is burst open by revolutionary laughter. Since we now perceive the face as an object of political contestation, it is no longer necessary to interpret these two images as a contradiction. The question is no longer one of the political trajectory inherent to the face itself, but rather to identify the balance of forces operating upon it in any given context. Different actors will be engaged in the struggle to dismantle or preserve it, to differing extents and for different purposes. The disarticulation of faciality from a totalising political project also allows us to entertain the possibility that elements of it might survive even the fundamental rupture of *subjectification* and *significance*. Might there, for instance, be forms of facial individuation or categorisation that persist without faciality? Could the face function in the absence of the subjective essence it is supposed to communicate? Will we see new face-forms, and what kinds of politics might they underwrite?

The confusion engendered by the belief that “the face is a politics” is evident when Edkins perceives what appears to her to be a contradiction inherent in our current political moment:

[Although] individual ‘man’ may, as Foucault argues, be disappearing as the key figure in our political thought, the face remains of haunting significance and political consequence. In politics today, then, there seems to be a contradiction between what we might expect – that the face is disappearing, with a shift from the modern episteme to a world of digital images and the post-human, and what seems to be happening – that the face endures as an emblem of political personhood. Explorations of political possibility would seem to have to take into account the (dis)appearance of the individual alongside the continuing (re)appearance of the face.[[494]](#footnote-494)

One explanation for the puzzlement expressed here is that Edkins’ understanding of face politics commits her to a theoretical Manicheanism, wherein the empire of the face must either stand or fall absolutely. This in turn inclines her to search for epochal epistemic shifts of the sort which generally only become clear in retrospect. But what if the face is being subtly reconfigured and mutated in ways that escape this binary framework? What if the dismantling of the face results not in the explosive emergence of a new “relational” identity, but instead a fresh struggle over the nature of expression and individuation, in which the face has a quite different role? Viewed in this light, the coincidence of the “(re)appearance of the face” with the “(dis)appearance of the individual” may start to seem somewhat less mysterious.

I submit that Edkins is correct to suggest that a shift is taking place, that we are living through a reconfiguration of how the face relates to the idea of the individual, and that one of the visible symptoms of this transformation is the continued (re)appearance of the face as an object of political contestation. Whether or not this heralds the end of “man” as “empirico-transcendental doublet” or the erasure of the face is, I believe, too soon to say. The best that can be done is to give an account of the sociotechnical forces currently bearing on the relationship between subject and face, and then to extrapolate from those conditions. Past this point, anything we say will have the character of speculation. I argue that this is both necessary and good. If we are to take hold of a present that is constantly slipping away from us, then there comes a point at which its movements must be anticipated. If this means courting the danger of being wrong, or even perhaps of foreclosing radical possibility, then the risk is commensurate to the potential gains: the bracing effect of lucid imaginings, a dose of useful paranoia, and if we’re lucky, maybe even a weapon or two.

**Global Face Culture**

Between the years of 2011 and 2014, the American artist Zach Blas produced *Facial Weaponization Suite*, a project seeking to engage with the increasing prevalence of technologies of biometric surveillance and facial recognition in everyday life. It took the form of a series of workshops held in different global locations, including sites in the USA, UK and Mexico. As well as providing a space where participants could discuss their experiences of and feelings about the securitization of the human body, Blas scanned the face of every attendee to create a three-dimensional biometric record of their face. He then aggregated the data of every participant, layering face on face until all legible forms were subsumed into a shapeless blob. This form was used to create a mould, from which would be produced a series of “collective masks” which would “[allow] participants to simultaneously wear the faces of many.” The result was a set of knobbly, vaguely Cronenbergian rhizomes in glossy plastic, coloured black, platinum and hot pink, utterly unrecognisable a piece of once-human anatomy.[[495]](#footnote-495)

These masks were in part a gesture of refusal, or as Blas put it, “weapons of defacement, modes of escaping the recognition-control of the face, a queer illegibility that disallows easy calculations and categorizations of the face.” By scrambling the biometric codes of multiple individuals into a single face-like surface, the masks simultaneously parodied and defied the surveillant gaze, an ostentatious rejection of coerced visibility. At the same time, they were an assertion of collective unity, inspired by “protest tactics that evade or reconfigure individual recognition, like Anonymous, the black bloc, Pussy Riot, and the Zapatistas.” With their masks in place, no-one’s face was their own, and yet each person wore the face of all others – a sweetly utopian muddling of subjectivities and a declaration of common purpose.

The piece also provides a usefully lurid reflection on the process of abstraction wrought upon the body by biometric technologies. As Kelley Gates explains in her book *Our Biometric Future*, part of the ideological appeal of facial recognition technologies is their appearance of naturalism, the idea that they do no more than ape the everyday experience of face-to-face interaction.[[496]](#footnote-496) *Facial Weaponization Suite* demonstrates just how untrue this is. A biometric scan decomposes the face first into a set of precise measurements, and then into lines of digital code. It is this sterile datum to which the machine relates; to believe that it “recognizes” is anthropomorphism of the most complacent variety. And yet, the wobbly, melting forms of Blas’ marks are also a salutary reminder of the extent to which our seemingly intuitive notions of facial meaning, identity and recognition are always suspended in a technological matrix. The face is always already denatured by media.

Blas’ frames his work as a response to “an explosively emerging “global face culture,” exemplified by biometrics and facial detection technologies, driven by ever obsessive and paranoid impulses to know, capture, categorize, and standardize human faces.” Seeking to relate this idea to a broader political context, he continues:

Rooted in commercial, state, and military interests, recent forays into facial recognition include the adoption of biometrics as a security technology for border crossings and visas; the proliferation of invasive surveillance cameras in urban settings, such as London’s massive CCTV network; the growth of biometric marketing that automates personalized advertisements based on gender, race, and physical and behavioural traits; enormous biometric data gathering sweeps led by military forces; and the vast array of facial identification and verification platforms found in social media and consumer markets, from Facebook’s auto-face tagging to the iPhone’s *RecognizeMe* application that uses face scanning to unlock phones.

It is just about six years since Blas wrote this passage, and the technological proliferation he noted continues apace. It is true that in the consumer sector, the most visible instances of global face culture are largely still gimmicks and bagatelles. Apple’s Face ID software, which allows users to unlock their devices and authorise online payments with their face, is now standard issue, whilst the widespread germination of Snapchat has furnished a blossoming of possibilities for facial play, with its bevy of filters, feature-swapping, gender-flipping and human-cartoon animal-chimera generating applications. Generally, the utility of such technology ranges from providing a bit of benign fun among friends to enabling extremely valuable practices of self-exploration and -validation, as users are allowed to casually experiment with different looks, identities and even forms of species-being. At the same time, it might also behove us to see these parlour games as the thin end of the wedge, doing the work of habituating us to a certain kind of relationship between our face and our electronic devices. This is not merely a question of exposure, but of interaction, of the passing back-and-forth of information, and the deep interleaving of our communications technologies with the creation and experience of facial meaning.

Meanwhile, the real work goes on behind the scenes. The last six years have seen a steady improvement in the flexibility and accuracy of facial recognition software, and a gradual multiplication of its potential applications. Functionalities which have been developed and refined in the consumer sphere are being adapted for deployment in the security and military sectors, and vice versa. The use of facial recognition technology and other similar gadgets is increasingly common amongst police and border control. A new wave of consumer products lurks just beneath the horizon, predicated upon the articulation of even more intimate relationships between face and device, awaiting the propitious alignment of market forces and public opinion. The next decade could yield transformations of which we currently have only the barest inkling.

**Automated Facial Analysis**

The phenomenon that Blas names as “global face culture” should be understood in two interrelated senses: as the popularisation and diversification of a suite of technologies under the general umbrella of what tech scholars Buolamwini and Gebru have termed “Automated Facial Analysis,” in response to the intensifying worldwide crisis of neoliberalism, wherein the imperative to surveil, track, manage and control target populations becomes ever more pronounced.[[497]](#footnote-497) Buolamwini and Gebru’s useful phrase (henceforth abbreviated as AFA) describes a contemporary research and development paradigm encompassing a range of tools dedicated to the computerised detection, identification and interpretation of faces. As we shall soon see, this definition covers an impressive array of distinct applications, but they all emerge from a single genealogical root – facial recognition technology (FRT). As the name suggests, FRT is the general term for any application which attempts to automatically match faces in photographs, recorded video or live footage to identities. Modern iterations of the technology are based around the use of computer vision algorithms, programs trained to detect specific patterns in sets of visual data. Typically this will amount to a sequence of operations wherein the algorithm first searches for faces within an image, and then extracts from those faces a template (based, for instance, on the spatial arrangement of features or the relative distribution of light and shade) which it checks against an identity database. This is a far more complicated task than this simplistic explanation suggests, but in recent years the top-end performance of FRTs (under certain conditions)[[498]](#footnote-498) has improved considerably. In 2014, Facebook’s DeepFace algorithm recorded a near-human success rate of 93.75% when attempting to match untagged facial images to user profiles.[[499]](#footnote-499)

The earliest attempts to produce a functional FRT system date back as far as the 1960s, but progress in the field accelerated exponentially in the wake of the post-9/11 security boom. Its primary applications have always been in the areas of security, intelligence and the military – the identification and tracking of persons of interest, the management of controlled spaces, population screening. It follows that the research and development of FRT has generally been a state-private partnership, comprising universities, commercial research institutions, government agencies and for-profit contractors. The first publicly known efforts in this regard were carried out in 1964-5 by a team of computer scientists led by Woody Bledsoe and Helen Chan, operating under the aegis of a Palo-Alto based private firm known as Panoramic Research. Their funding, however, was supplied by “an unnamed intelligence agency” who discouraged both publication and publicity.[[500]](#footnote-500) The details of their research remain under wraps. This model of collaboration between the US government and Silicon Valley, meanwhile, persists to this very day. Microsoft, Amazon and Google are all known to have participated in the US Department of Defence’s “Project Maven”, one of the goals of which “involves developing and integrating computer-vision algorithms needed to help military and civilian analysts encumbered by the sheer volume of full-motion video data that DoD collects every day in support of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations.”[[501]](#footnote-501)

In June 2018, Google announced that it would not be renewing its contract with Project Maven, after a petition against the collaboration signed by nearly 4,000 employees was published in the *New York Times*.[[502]](#footnote-502) These concerned employees were troubled, no doubt justifiably, that the work they were conducting on computer vision and artificial intelligence (which would certainly involve research into automated facial analysis) was being fed into the US government’s infamous drone programme, which deploys thousands of unmanned aircraft to conflict zones around the world, with tactical roles which range from surveillance to extrajudicial assassination. The DoD, for their part, divides Project Maven into two phases, the first of which focuses on the use of AI for analysis of video-data (i.e. drone footage) after the fact, and the second of which is concerned with “turning the enormous volume of data available to DoD into actionable intelligence and decision-quality insights at speed” – which is to say, providing real-time feedback on operations as they unfold. It was ultimately the thought that a tool that they had written (such as, for instance, a facial recognition algorithm) might end up feeding into the targeting system of a combat drone which compelled Google’s staff (or a small percentage of them, at any rate) to speak out:

Recently, Googlers voiced concerns about Maven internally. Diane Greene [then-CEO of Google Cloud] responded, assuring them that the technology will not “operate or fly drones” and “will not be used to launch weapons.” While this eliminates a narrow set of direct applications, the technology is being built for the military, and once it’s delivered it could easily be used to assist in these tasks.[[503]](#footnote-503)

Google’s withdrawal from Project Maven was a considerable (but not irreplaceable) loss to the DoD. In the last decade or so, the main force driving progress in FRT has been the activities of the Big Five tech corporations (Facebook, Google, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft), each of which is continuously refining and reiterating its own proprietary software. Of course, these transnational entities have unprecedented quantities of capital and expertise to throw at the problem, but their success must also be attributed to their control over and access to the monstrous agglomerations of image data created by the everyday activity of the global network. Facebook, for instance, with its 2.27 billion monthly users as of the end of 2018, controls the largest portrait gallery ever assembled in human history, an unparalleled research for testing and improving facial recognition algorithms.[[504]](#footnote-504) Recently, the reception of Facebook’s “Ten Year Challenge”, an innocent-sounding viral event which encouraged users to upload two photographs of themselves taken ten years apart, was soured when party-pooping journalists started pointing out the corporation’s ulterior motive. Every time a user posted a pair of photos, they were providing Facebook with a data point, prelabelled and ready to be used to enhance the age-detection capabilities of their algorithms.[[505]](#footnote-505)

This controversy neatly points up the way in which the face is being absorbed into the broader economy of what Shoshana Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism,” a coinage which she defines as “A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales.”[[506]](#footnote-506) In short, the theory of surveillance capitalism attempts to characterise the ways in which twenty-first century capital has adapted to the new opportunities for value-extraction and accumulation created by the wave of modern communications technologies which proliferated around the emergence of Web 2.0. Surveillance capital establishes proprietary digital platforms, such as social media or internet search engines, through which individual users carry out their daily activities. The data created in the course of these activities (i.e., an individual’s search history) is collated and mined for what Zuboff calls a “behavioural surplus” which is then “fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as “machine intelligence”, and fabricated into *prediction products* that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later.”[[507]](#footnote-507) For instance, the behavioural surplus that Google extracts from an individual’s search activity will be used to provide targeted advertising, as well as to form the basis of demographic profiles which can then be sold to marketing companies, political consultancies, social engineering firms and so on. The value of these “prediction products” is not merely in their capacity to foresee behaviour, but also to influence it, whether by associating a certain set of search terms with a particular piece of advertising, or targeting a specific group of people with bespoke political messaging. Surveillance capital therefore operates through feedback loops, wherein the value of the data extracted rises in proportion to the technology’s capacity to shape social reality. Data flows upwards, into the hands of the corporations who own the platforms and the entities to whom they sell the behavioural surplus. Meanwhile, power is projected downwards, as the experience of the end user and the broader social environment are modified to enable the more efficient extraction of value. This is why Zuboff argues that we ought to see surveillance capitalism as a “*coup from above*, not an overthrow of the state but rather an overthrow of the people’s sovereignty.”[[508]](#footnote-508) It ensnares subjective experience in a tangle of feedback loops, winding them denser and tighter until, it seems, there is no action that cannot be registered, quantified and monetized.

Every day, millions of us upload facial images onto proprietary social media platforms which, as a matter of course, claim the right to use those images according to their own purposes. Facebook, for instance, will use this constant influx of image data to refine its algorithms, not only improving its ability to detect and recognise faces, but also to analyse them for other demographic characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity. Of course, the immediate use of this behavioural surplus will be to provide a more personalised, responsive and feature-rich experience for the end user. Beyond this immediate source of value-creation, however, it can also be folded into the demographic profiling that forms the basis for Facebook’s Ad Manager, which allows advertisers to target users with more or less any imaginable combination of characteristics. Further to this, however, the AFA tools that Facebook develops through this process can also be sold on or shared with other actors, perhaps as part of a program like Project Maven. A facial image which began its life on a person’s Instagram feed could in principle form part of a dataset that is used to train software which will be integrated into the next generation of “smart” combat drones.

The reality with which we have to reckon today is that our faces now live within these diffuse networks of information-capital, endlessly circulating, accruing value and producing significations in contexts beyond our imagination. We may deploy facial images – as Facebook profile pictures or Twitter avatars – in an attempt to consolidate and humanize our digital identities, but there is an equal sense in which they simultaneously enact what Deleuze would call our “dividuality”, a state in which, as Franklin puts it, the subject is “broken down into discrete parts that are each representable as symbolic tokens and capturable as labor…productivity, appearance, genetic traits, lifestyle preferences, and cultural and creative faculties.”[[509]](#footnote-509) Reflecting on the way that Facebook structures the meaning of the faces uploaded to its site, the critic Jennifer Gonzalez makes the following trenchant observation:

Ninety percent of the profiles on Facebook contain an image; most are faces. Each face is presented as one point in a nexus of other faces, each with its own extending network, creating vast pools of tenuous social links that grow exponentially. Unlike the portraits of previous eras, depicting wealth or fame, the faces on Facebook depict anyone who can follow the simple uploading directions on the website. More important, the face is no longer presented as singular or isolated, but becomes the ultimate origin of other faces, always defined by, surrounded by, and in some way guaranteed by the visual presence of others. The meaning of the Facebook face is not limited to facial features, to the façade, but extends to the other faces to which it is linked. Within multiple trajectories of signification, the face enlivens and mobilizes social connections that become much more significant than the photographic representation of individuals.[[510]](#footnote-510)

This brilliant analysis does not only define the condition of the “Facebook face”; it also illuminates the general nature of the face’s existence under surveillance capitalism. No longer the emblem of the individual’s constitutive incommensurability, it now signifies all the ways in which its properties can be accommodated to abstract scales of measurement. Where it may once have been thought to refer the viewer inwards, towards the soul, the self or some other invisible homunculus, the face now points outwards, distributing the subject’s existence centrifugally across an endlessly ramifying web of connections. The relationship of identification between the subject and their face therefore no longer has any special privileges; the meaning of the latter will arise primarily from its nodular links with other systems of signification and value.

**Emotion Analytics**

We have so far only considered AFA technologies which aim to detect identity, or else some relatively (and I stress, *relatively*) straightforward demographic categories such as age or gender. The last several years, however, has led to a stunning diversification of the types of information that AFA claims to be able to capture, moving beyond mere recognition to mine deeper strata of human experience. The most significant development in this regard is the rise of so-called Emotion Analytics, automated technologies which analyse faces for signs of an individual’s emotional state. The past decade has seen the launch of a number of start-ups in this area, including Affectiva, Sensum, RealEyes and Emotient, the latter of which was acquired by Apple in 2016, whilst Microsoft and Google have also created their own emotion recognition APIs. Broadly speaking, these systems typically work by checking an individual’s facial movements against a pre-programmed repertoire of units of facial behaviour associated either singly or in combination with a particular emotion. The result can be presented in terms of a single dominant emotion (i.e., “this person is feeling angry”), or as a percentage score, a format which attempts to allow for the idea of mixed or simultaneous emotions, but typically ends in bathetic statements along the lines of “this person is 23% Angry, 41% Sad and 36% Fearful.”[[511]](#footnote-511)

The primary market for most of these companies seems currently to be in advertising, offering emotion analytics as a means of empirically measuring consumer engagement with promotional media, as well as empathic tech – consumer devices which automatically adjust their functioning according to their owner’s emotional state. For instance, the context of the so-called “smart home”, your domestic helper (Siri, Alexa or equivalent) could use webcams alongside voice analysis, heart rate measurement, skin conductance and so on to constantly monitor your mood, independently electing to adjust the lighting or play cheerful music if it detects you sinking into a funk.[[512]](#footnote-512) Meanwhile, in the “smart city”, perpetual tracking of the emotional states of individuals and groups could not only be used to screen for potential malefactors, but also to monitor the “sentiments” of people as they move through and interact with particular spaces, architectural features, services or institutions – a robotic parody of psychogeography, in which the city’s spectral ley-lines and mnemonic under-structures are no longer traced by romantic cranks and quixotic revolutionaries, but by the sharp vectors of big data.[[513]](#footnote-513)

However, Emotion Analytics is already also being mooted as a possible addition to existing security frameworks, where it would be used to screen people at airports, government buildings and other controlled spaces for anger, anxiety or other signs of “malintent,” which the US Department of Homeland Security defines as “the mental state of an individual intending to cause harm to our citizens or infrastructure.”[[514]](#footnote-514) In September 2016, the European Commission launched the gruesomely-titled iBorderCtrl, a research project led by Luxembourg-based ICT company European Dynamics in partnership with various other private enterprises, universities and the agencies responsible for border security in Greece, Latvia and Hungary.[[515]](#footnote-515) The project, which aims “to enable faster and thorough (sic) border control for third country nationals crossing the land borders of EU member states,” proposes that crossing the border into the EU should be a “two-stage procedure”, in which travellers are encouraged to complete an online pre-registration process before setting off. As well as using this opportunity to submit relevant documents and declarations, the traveller would also be subject to a real-time interview, conducted over webcam with a “virtual border guard”, whose gender, ethnicity and language are personalised to match the individual. The footage from this interview would be used to match the traveller’s face with their documentation, to cross-reference their image with available ID databases and, most strikingly, as a chance to deploy “automated deception detection” (ADDS), a mechanism which purports to be able to calculate the probability that an individual has given a misleading response to a particular question by analysing “non-verbal microexpressions” – momentary, scarcely perceptible facial convulsions which, according to an influential body of psychological research, can indicate either the intention to deceive or the presence of a suppressed emotional reaction.

On the basis of this test, as well as other unspecified variables (which could quite conceivably include country of origin or other proxies for ethnicity), each traveller will receive an “actionable risk score,” with those who pass a certain threshold being flagged for further investigation when they reach the border. This system will, its devisors explain, allow for a more efficient distribution of human resources, as border agents are enabled to focus on “high-risk” cases, whilst “low-risk” travellers are subject to less stringent checks. It would also substantially extend the competencies of border security agencies, augmenting their already existing capacities to identify and track individuals with the ability to evaluate a person’s intentions and trustworthiness – as the authors of the project put it, to “move beyond biometrics and onto biomarkers of deceit.” One of the specific scenarios that iBorderCtrl is designed to address is a situation in which a “traveller with ill intentions” attempts to cross the border using authentic, valid documentation. The ADDS would provide border agencies with potential grounds to apprehend such an individual even in the event that they possess all the required documents, expanding the already considerable impunity afforded border agents in their dealings with non-EU citizens.

A technology like iBorderCtrl constitutes a complete rearticulation of the face’s relationship to subjective meaning. In the course of this project, we have investigated a series of hermeneutic apparatuses which have struggled, in one way or another, to overcome the fundamental indeterminacy of the face-subject relationship: the obscurity of its signifying structure, the inherence of its expressivity in fleeting, labile motions, the irreducible commitment of a part of its meaning to the embodied context to which it was first disclosed. Emotion analytics slices through this Gordian knot by excising the subject from the process of facial meaning-making altogether. With EA, facial expression no longer has its referent in some internalised subject. It is a purely somatic phenomenon occurring on the surface of the body, finding its meaning ultimately not in the experience of the subject to whom it ostensibly refers, but within the apparatus which reads them, which is invested with absolute hermeneutic authority. This is the final deterritorialization: the face’s true significance is not disclosed on the terrain of the embodied encounter, but with the matching of a biometric trace to a digital template. All other modalities of expression are subordinated to this transcendental reading; nothing the subject says or does can affect the verdict. The face has been removed once and for all from the space of political dissensus. Let us make no mistake here – this is nothing more than the “dismantling of the face”, in the form of a total rupture between *signifiance* (the face’s signifying function) from *subjectification* (the face’s capacity to embody a subject). No-one would call it a liberation.

The deep absurdity of this de-facializing gesture can be illustrated by a thought experiment, shared with us by a software engineer responsible for the development of EA technology, Affectiva’s Forest Handford:

Weeks ago I saw an older woman crying outside my office building as I was walking in. She was alone, and I worried she needed help. I was afraid to ask, but I set my fears aside and walked up to her. She appreciated my gesture, but said she would be fine and her husband would be along soon. With emotion enabled AR [augmented reality], I could have had far more details to help me through the situation. It would have helped me know if I should approach her. It would have also let me know how she truly felt about my talking to her.[[516]](#footnote-516)

To be clear, what Handford is envisioning here is some kind of “augmented reality” (AR) visual overlay, provided via a smartphone or a Google Glass-style wearable device, which would scan faces, body language and other relevant cues in real-time in order to inform the user of the emotional state of other people, expressing this information as a percentage score or as a synthetic classification along the lines of “Sadness, with a tinge of Fear.” Handford imagines that such an apparatus would provide him with all requisite information regarding the stakes of his encounter with this “older woman.” He would know whether or not he should approach her; he would know what to say or do to help; he would immediately know how she was responding to his actions – a totally frictionless and mutually beneficial social exchange.

In the original situation which inspired Handford’s blogpost, the woman’s face was the site of a powerful and yet fundamentally indeterminate set of visual cues. Tears, redness, contorted features – all of these are typically understood as the signs of a heightened emotion state, quite possibly distress. It seems perfectly reasonable, under the circumstances described, to suppose that someone exhibiting these characteristics might need and want our assistance. But it is impossible to be sure. It may be that the woman is crying for joy or relief; she may have her own reasons for not wanting help from Handford in particular; it may be, as she herself asserted, that she had already taken steps to resolve her situation and was merely waiting for a loved one to arrive. Her tear-streaked face impresses the urgency of these scenarios (and many more besides) on Handford’s imagination without validating any one of them in particular, and his response can only be determined on the basis of this uncertainty. The woman may or may not need his help; if she does, there is no means of knowing in advance the nature or limits of what she might require of him. The only way to discover what is really at stake in this event is to address the woman such that she can represent her own feelings and articulate her own needs – at which point, of course, Handford will be committed either to undertake a course of action whose costs he cannot anticipate, or to refuse the woman having initially offered his assistance.

Unknowing, anxiety, the friction between general principles and the specificities of an encounter, the impossibility of fully anticipating the consequences of one’s actions – these are not simply unpleasant side-effects that accompany the commission of an ethical gesture. They are the experience of the ethical itself: not a bug but a feature, to use a register that Handford might more easily grasp. In seeking to smooth out the kinks in human communication, Emotion Analytics removes the face from the realm of ethics altogether. What we get instead is raw empirical data. EA is based on the proposition that there are (depending on who you ask) ten or six or seven or four universal human emotions, generally assembled from some combination of anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise. These are indexed directly to a repertoire of “facial action units” – modular sets of muscular contractions which can be combined to produce said emotions in varying degrees of intensity and in pure or mixed forms. The meanings of these units are context-independent. A sad face is a sad face no matter the circumstances under which it is encountered, not least because the sincerity or otherwise of the sadness will necessarily be a legible part of the expressive display. In this way, emotion analytics promises to be able to distinguish between “genuine” and “feigned” emotions – presumably one of the main ways in which Handford imagines it would facilitate seamless mutual understanding. The complex of projection, pre-emption, second-guessing, second-thoughts, indeterminately voluntary and unconscious actions and so forth that underpins even the simplest emotive interaction is neatly put away, replaced by a linear syntax of clean, emphatic signs, each unit clicking seamlessly to the next like the components of a flat-pack furnishing.

In Handford’s sketch, not only does his AR device subtract his uncertainty and awkwardness from the situation, it also relieves the woman of the right to narrate and perform her own subjectivity. Her own beliefs, assertions and actions no longer have a privileged status with regards to her inner life. Quite the reverse, in fact – notwithstanding the possibility of a technical error, any deviation between the machine’s verdict and her own account of her feelings or intentions would, *ipso facto*, constitute a form of deceit on her part. Where once her face might have functioned as a space of negotiation and contest between her own ideas of her self and the selves attributed to her from the outside world, now it becomes the absolute criterion according to which the authenticity of her every word and deed can be judged. Handford’s fantasy begs the question – what would he do if his device told him that the woman was in profound distress and needed help, but then when he approached her she told him nothing was wrong? Call her a liar, and declare his intention to help her anyway? And if he isn’t prepared to assert that his device knows how the woman feels better than she does, then what difference has emotion analytics made to the “problem” he identified in the first place? This contradiction points us towards a more disturbing prospect – the spectre of chivalric tech pioneers accosting strange women in the street is one thing, but the real danger would come when such technologies end up in the hands of parties with the power to enforce their conclusions. Then, the difference between an “authentic” and a “social” smile could really be a matter of life and death.

Ultimately, the terms of this encounter boil down to the degree of hermeneutic authority attributed to the technology of emotion analytics. This is a question cannot be reduced to purely technical or epistemological factors. The accuracy with which the device measures whatever it is supposed to measure is one thing, but its capacity to actually affect social interactions in the way that Handford wants it to depends upon the ability of emotionally analytics to command a social consensus. People would either have to accept that the machine’s account of their emotional state is more authoritative than their own, or else to be put in a situation where their own assertions about the matter are by the by – a scenario such as is envisioned by the designers of iBorderCtrl, wherein the facial readings proffered by the EA tech are backed by the full institutional force of the European immigration system. Pragmatically speaking, the truth-value of Emotion Analytics derives neither from the expressive structure of the face itself nor from the ingenuity of its technological design, but from the complex of socio-political power which determines its purpose, its targets and the context of its use.

In the previous chapter, we characterised the physiognomic impulse as, at heart, the desire to exercise domination over the bodies of others. Recall Oswald Spengler: “The adept of human beings seizes the alien psyche by comprehending it. That is power, superiority of the person who comprehends over the person who is comprehended.”[[517]](#footnote-517) Emotion analytics represents an instance of this dynamic in practice, providing the entity which controls the technology with the impunity to name, and therefore leverage, the affective states of its targets. This power relation is even more directly demonstrated, however, in a new outgrowth of the field of AFA: Facial Personality Analytics. That is, algorithmic technologies which purport to be able to discover insights into the characterological traits or behavioural tendencies of individuals on the basis of their facial appearance.

**Facial Personality Analytics**

In November 2016 Xiaolin Wu and Xi Zhang, a pair of computer engineers from Shanghai Jiao Ting University, uploaded a paper entitled “Automated Inference on Criminality Using Face Images” to arXiv, an online repository for academic publications in the fields of physics, mathematics and computer science. They claimed to have developed an image recognition algorithm capable of detecting an individual’s propensity for criminal behaviour from a photograph of their face. Their algorithm was produced through the process known as machine learning, whereby a computer program is able to induce its own method for completing an assigned task through a massively convoluted process of trial and error, rather than receiving its instructions from a human programmer. In Wu and Zhang’s case, the algorithm “trained itself”, as it were, by systematically comparing two sets of facial photographs of Chinese men between the age of eighteen and fifty-five with no facial hair, scars or other distinctive markings. The members of the first set had all been convicted of a crime in the Chinese judicial system, the second were “law-abiding citizens.” If the algorithm proved capable of distinguishing between these two groups purely by analysing and contrasting their average facial structures, then this would be an indication, the researchers presumed, that there was in the face some set of physiological features which would allow an observer to intuit the presence of a criminal personality. Contrary to their professed expectations, the most powerful algorithm that they tested was able to correctly categorise 89% of the pictures in the initial training set – enough, they believed, to “empirically establish the validity of automated face-induced inference on criminality.”[[518]](#footnote-518)

About a year after “Automated Inference” another paper emerged, this time authored by Stanford researchers Michal Kosinski and Yilun Wang and bearing the title “Deep Neural Networks Are More Accurate Than Humans at Detecting Sexual Orientation From Facial Images.”[[519]](#footnote-519) This made essentially the same claims as Wu and Zhang, but this time around sexual orientation – specifically, arguing that their algorithm was capable of telling if an individual was gay or straight on the basis of images harvested from a dating website. Both of these studies, neither of which has received formal peer review, were the subject of trenchant ethical, methodological and philosophical critiques. There is not space here to rehearse them all in full – suffice to say that there is every reason to doubt the empirical validity of their advertised results. For our purposes, let’s focus on the mechanisms of power implicit in these technologies. Wu and Zhang’s study, for instance, uses the receipt of a criminal conviction in the Chinese legal system as a proxy for the manifestation of an innate criminal tendency. Not only does this presume that unapprehended criminals are not prevalent in the non-criminal side of the sample, it also presupposes the absolute probity of the Chinese juridico-legal apparatus – a dubious assumption to make anywhere in the world. The Chinese government has recently sanctioned the internment of as many as one million members of the Muslim Uighur minority in concentration camps in Xinjiang province.[[520]](#footnote-520) Do their facial features – which presumably reflect their broadly Turkic ethnic heritage – reveal inherent criminal proclivities? Since it is well established that members of ethnic minorities in the UK and many other societies are generally more likely to fall foul of law enforcement, should we therefore conclude that these groups are more inclined to criminal behaviour, and that these inclinations will be observable in their faces? Wu and Zhang’s model of criminality collapses at the touch of even the mildest structural critique; conversely, it only holds water to the extent that one is willing to maintain a thoroughly credulous and deferential attitude towards the workings of state power. Under the eye of their algorithm, the face becomes a mechanism for laundering an utterly craven demand for political submission.

It would not be unreasonable at this stage to view these relatively isolated examples of Facial Personality Analytics as an eccentric fringe phenomenon, signal-boosted by sensationalist media coverage. Then again, we might observe that in 2014, a tech start-up with the clatteringly infelicitous name “Faception” launched in Tel-Aviv, Israel. Founded by entrepreneur Shai Gilboa and computer vision expert Dr Itzik Wolf, the company first attracted international press attention in the summer of 2016. On its own website, Faception purports to “have successfully addressed a challenge that is as old as humanity: knowing the personality of individuals…[We are] first-to-technology and first-to-market with proprietary computer vision and machine learning technology for profiling people and revealing their personality based on their facial image.” Their product is a computer vision algorithm which, to the best of our knowledge, presumably works along much the same lines as Wu and Zhang’s. As their promotional copy puts it, the Faception algorithm can “analyse faces from video streams (recorded and live), camera, or online databases, encode the faces in proprietary image descriptors and match an individual with various personality traits and types with a high level of accuracy.” In other words, given an image of an individual’s face, the algorithm will analyse said image and assign that individual a percentage probability of belonging to a pre-specified type or “classifier.” A list of classifiers upon which the effectiveness of the technology has supposedly been tested includes, amongst its highlights: “High IQ”, “Bingo Player”, “Brand Promoter”, “Terrorist”, “Paedophile”. Supplied with your photograph, then, Faception would be able to give you a series of percentage scores expressing the degree to which your facial features align you with each of these categories.[[521]](#footnote-521) In 2016, the company reported that it had been contracted by an unnamed state security agency, rumoured by some to be the US Department of Homeland Security. Faception do not share public details of their proprietary software, nevertheless, there are clearly some in positions of quite terrifying power who have been convinced by what they have seen of its proficiencies.[[522]](#footnote-522)

Reflecting on the work of his great enemy Lavater in the late 1700s, Georg Lichtenberg wrote: “If physiognomics ever becomes what Lavater hopes it will be, then we will begin to hang children before they commit the crimes that deserve the gallows; a new kind of confirmation ritual will be practiced every year. A physiognomic *auto-da-fé*.”[[523]](#footnote-523) The reference to the Spanish Inquisition’s rituals of public penance and execution is apt, because it directs us to a deeper truth. When it comes to the question of the face and the soul, truth-claims are ultimately weighed by the power of the institution that is willing to prosecute them. The attraction of AFA to an individual like Forest Handford may be that it offers the individual a whiff of this intoxicating megalomania, but ultimately this is a weapon which can only really be wielded by corporate entities. Its most impactful implementations will be at the level of government agencies and transnational corporations, and its most significant effects felt at the scale of populations. In order to grasp the real political stakes of the AFA phenomenon, it is therefore necessary to say something about the broader historical context into which it is emerging.

**Neoliberalism and Control**

In her book *Our Biometric Future*, Kelley Gates presents the rise of FRT as a part of the process of neoliberalisation, which, following David Harvey, she identifies as a political project embraced by global elites following the crisis of capital accumulation which set in during the mid-1970s. In general, Harvey defines the project of neoliberalism as the removal of the “web of social and political constraints” – regulation, welfare, government ownership, the bargaining power of organized labour – which had previously restrained the exercise of market freedom and the profit-making capacities of big business.[[524]](#footnote-524) For our purpose, two trends in particular are of interest. First, there is the move towards a globalised network society, characterised by the extension of chains of production and the circulation of goods, the mobility of labour and capital, the incessant and instantaneous flow of information and the subordination of local and national political power to a transnational regime of economic necessity, all under the aegis of stimulating productivity through free competition. Second, there is the withdrawal of the state as a paternalistic influence in the everyday lives of its citizens, through programs of welfare, social services, nationalised industry and amenities and so on, and its replacement by a managerial style of governmentality, dedicated to “marshalling the state’s support for productivity gains and competitiveness of national economies, often to the detriment of social protection and public interest regulations.”[[525]](#footnote-525)

These two shifts stimulated in turn the development of new strategies of governmentality. For instance, the expansion of global networks of communication and commerce, emblematised above all by the development of the internet, necessitated the development of mechanisms capable of tracking the movement and behaviour of subjects as they traversed said networks. As Gates explains:

In a society where an increasing number of social interactions and economic transactions were occurring via proprietary computer networks, biometric technologies [emerge] as a solution to a set of pressing problems, such as verifying the legitimate status of individual users, monitoring their behaviors, and controlling their access to networks, as well as to the spaces and entities over which those networks extend: national territories, transportation systems, financial institutions, spaces of production and consumption, and, of course, information itself.[[526]](#footnote-526)

One of the consequences of the evolution of the network society, then, was what Gates, following Nikolas Rose, refers to as the “securitization of identity,” which is to say, the accommodation of political and social subjecthood to a set of remotely verifiable criteria, including biometric identifiers relating to facial appearance.[[527]](#footnote-527) In this context, the power of state or corporate institutions over their subject populations is largely formulated in terms of the guaranteeing and withholding of various levels of access and freedom of movement on the basis of these securitized identities.

This shift towards the framework of security as the primary modality for the exercise of power simultaneously feeds into another key aspect of neoliberal governmentality. As the state abandons its various paternalistic functions, it is obliged to focus its powers ever more intently on its remaining responsibility – that is, to be capital’s policeman, managing the behaviour of an increasingly discontented and dispossessed global underclass. The insecurity of life within a globalised labour market and the continued withdrawal of state beneficence necessarily makes this an increasingly unenviable task, whilst a hegemonic commitment to austerity, such as has prevailed in much of Europe and North America from the 2007 financial crisis up to the present day, often means that it must be accomplished on an ever-dwindling budget. Hence the appeal of technologies like AFA, which seem to present law enforcement agencies with the magic bullet of simultaneously reduced labour costs and increased efficiency. Police forces in both the UK and the US have been enthusiastic early-adopters of facial recognition technology, outstripping (and in some cases trampling) both regulatory frameworks and technological readiness.[[528]](#footnote-528) As Gates puts it, this should be seen as “a response to a set of conflicting demands of both the state and the business system to individualize and to classify, to include and to exclude, to protect and to punish, to monitor and define parameters, and to otherwise govern populations in the face of their radical destabilization under the wrenching neoliberal reforms instituted in the United States and across the globe during the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.”[[529]](#footnote-529)

This new mode of governmentality that Gates describes corresponds to a deep shift in the modality through which power is exerted in twenty-first century capitalist democracies. In his short essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” Deleuze describes the development of a political conjunction wherein power is no longer exercised primarily through the old Foucauldian mechanisms of sovereignty and discipline, but rather by systems of control. Deleuze imagines control in the first instance as the expansion of certain functions of power (i.e. surveillance, management, individuation and the internalisation of these forces within the structure of the self) beyond the spatial boundaries of the disciplinary institutions which had previously administered them – the school, the hospital, the factory, the prison, the family and so on. Instead of this series of enclosed institutions, “control” power works by distributing itself throughout a network which seeks to encompass and to a certain degree homogenize all social and private spaces.[[530]](#footnote-530) Perhaps the most obvious example of this phenomenon is smartphone technology. Instead of being surveilled and managed by a power which locates itself in a position of elevated centrality (as in the panopticon), we now each carry with us at all times a device which tracks our physical location, logs our social interactions, facilitates our consumption, aggregates our desires, measures our biological rhythms, and renders all of this legible to “Cloud” entities such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, as well as agencies of state. In this way, control extends itself across an ever-widening territory whilst simultaneously sinking itself deeper and deeper into the marrow of what it means to be an individuated subject.

With regards to the subject, control disposes of the disciplinary imperative to train the individual by encouraging them to internalise the rules and practices embodied by its enclosed institutional spaces. On the contrary, control power has no concern for the subject’s interiority. Instead, it pragmatically doles out freedoms and restrictions on the basis of a thoroughly securitized conception of identity. Sociologist Didier Bigo illustrates the essence of this distinction through a concept he calls, in a charmingly un

subtle riff on Foucault, the “Banopticon."

The Ban-opticon is then characterized by the exceptionalism of power (rules of emergency and their tendency to become permanent), by the way it excludes certain groups in the name of their future potential behaviour (profiling) and by the way it normalizes the non-excluded through its production of normative imperatives, the most important of which is free movement.[[531]](#footnote-531)

As opposed to the Panopticon, the Banopticon “depends no longer on immobilizing bodies under the analytic gaze of the watcher but on profiles that signify differences, on exceptionalism with respect to norms and on the rapidity with which one “evacuates.”” The notion of subject-formation through disciplinary training, so fundamental to the Panopticon, is at most a remote epiphenomenon of Banoptic power, which addresses itself directly to the management of population flows without any regard for the values or beliefs of the individual: “A skin colour, an accent, an attitude and one is slotted, extracted from the unmarked masses and, if necessary, evacuated. Policing is thus an affair of the margin, of clean-up, and needs concern itself only minimally with “norms.””[[532]](#footnote-532) In this regard, the Banopticon should be viewed as the spatial imaginary of control, just as the Panopticon is the spatial imaginary of discipline. If, however, the former were to be expressed as an architectural concept, it would not be a prison, or indeed any spatially discrete institution, but the (dis)continuous *dispositif* of border control and the refugee camp.

A system like iBorderCtrl manifests Banoptic logic in its purest form. It ought to be understood in the first instance as a response to the so-called “migrant crisis” – the phrase typically used to describe the increase in African and Middle-Eastern immigration to Europe since 2015, a spike due in no small part to the catastrophic after-effects of neo-imperialist wars (figures indicate that the majority of migrants at the height of the “crisis” in 2015 were from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan)[[533]](#footnote-533) and incipient climate change.[[534]](#footnote-534) This escalated influx of desperate, dispossessed people put pressure on border infrastructures, whilst simultaneously creating a political imperative for governments to demonstrate the rationality, thoroughness and above all strictness of their immigration policy. This latter move was itself a corollary of the rise of far-right ethnonationalism, a force which makes itself felt in the elected administrations of Poland, Hungary, Italy and Austria, and shows its influence in the increased popularity of the AfD in Germany and the National Rally Party (formerly the National Front) in France, not to mention Brexit. The EU finds itself, not unlike the democratic governments of many of its member states, in the position of trying to placate, buy off or co-opt these far-right movements with a “tough on immigration” stance, whilst somehow also preserving its commitment to the free movement of labour and capital, two principles which are key to its role as a facilitator of neoliberal economic policies and central to its professed values, such as they are.

As an attempt to manage this contradiction, iBorderCtrl is a paradigmatically neoliberal gesture. It addresses the problem through two overlapping lenses – a) the drive to subject all public activities to the logic of “efficiency savings”, and b) the technocratic ideology that Evgeny Morozov has called “solutionism,” which “[recasts] all complex social situations either as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized.”[[535]](#footnote-535) Together, these produce a framing of the issue which brackets both the political conflicts which surround it and the human consequences of its implementation as externalities, subordinate to the practical exigencies of “getting things done”. So it is that the contemporary struggle over the nature of national (or in this case supranational) sovereignty (whether, for instance, the *demos* is conceptualised in terms of ethno-cultural identity) is transcribed as a matter of efficiently distributing the workload of border agents, increasing “throughput” and cutting waiting times for “law-abiding” travellers. iBorderCtrl short-circuits the practical and moral complexities of such questions by proposing a model of global society which is theoretically open to all, but which operates in practice as a two-speed system in which there is freedom of movement and universal citizenship for those with the requisite entitlements, and pepper-spray, attack-dogs and refugee camps for the rest. It sustains the political fantasy of the ideal border, administered with perfect justice and proficiency, where every malefactor is apprehended and every well-intentioned traveller waved through, whilst expanding the capacity for arbitrary violence at the border as it currently exists.

On the one hand, the face emerges into this context as the object of the magical thinking that underpins neoliberal ethics – an infallible mechanism through which each individual can be sorted into their proper place and assigned their just deserts, naturally, non-invasively and with all room for objections and ugly disagreements foreclosed. On the other, it operates in practice as the site where brute power lays its hands directly on the body of its subject, inscribing their body with a value which they have no right to contradict or reject. It is clear enough in this situation that the face is no longer the site of any kind of disciplinary training. Indeed, there is no interest whatsoever in the interiority of the subject to which it applies, nor even in their behaviour. The role of the face is simply to place the individual with regards to a system of access and interdiction, according to a profile whose details have been registered in advance.

**Electrofacial Hacking**

What are the prospects of a politics of “dismantling the face” under such circumstances? A useful indication, I propose, is provided by the work of Dutch performance artist Arthur Elsenaar. His practice, in the most general sense, seeks to create performances by using electric current to stimulate the muscles of the body. In an early piece entitled *Body Convention* (1993), Elsenaar wired his body up to a Doppler radar, creating what he called an “extended personal zone,” a sort of enhanced proprioceptive radius or inflated personal space.[[536]](#footnote-536) When audience members stepped within this zone, a current was passed through electrical stimulators attached to the surface of his skin, producing convulsive movements of the limbs and torso. Part dance, part cringe.

*Body Convention* lays out the basic principle of Elsenaar’s art – the use of electricity to subject the muscles of a body to an external agency. Over the next couple of years, he would refine this focus in two important ways. First, he would dedicate himself almost exclusively to the manipulation and exploration of the human face. Second, the agency which motivated his performative contortions would no longer be that of another embodied individual, but instead, a computer. Beginning in 1995, Elsenaar dedicated his work primarily to the elaboration and display of algorithmically derived facial movement.

This project would reach its first phase of maturity with the 1995 performance lecture *Huge Harry: Towards A Digital Computer with a Human Face*. Here, Elsenaar seated himself before an audience in front of a real-time magnified projection of his own face. A skein of thin wires spread across his cheeks and brow, vaguely reminiscent of hospital feeding tubes, attached to the skin by small adhesive tags. The electrodes at the end of these wires were connected to a “facial muscle control system” (Elsenaar’s own design), which converted the commands generated by a nearby computer into a series of electrical impulses, stimulating the muscles of his face in order to create particular movement patterns. For the duration of the performance, the artist sat silent and still, whilst the disembodied voice of AI “personality” Huge Harry (the product of a voice-synthesis machine not dissimilar to that used by Professor Stephen Hawking) delivered a lecture on the potential uses of the face in human-machine interaction.[[537]](#footnote-537)

Harry’s lecture consists chiefly of a series of provocations, wherein his “computational perspective” works to invert the priority usually given to human subjectivity, interiority and emotion in discussions of the face and facial expression. Grasping the body in terms of machine analogies, he describes the face as a form of CRT display (upgraded to an LED in later performances), and its communicative content as “parameter settings.” At particular moments during the talk, Harry transmits electrical impulses which stimulate Elsenaar’s face in order to demonstrate one of his points – in one especially memorable instance he incrementally increases the voltage passing through the so-called “Muscles of Sadness” (the Quadratus Labii Inferior), so that his lower lip is gradually everted:

Now, we put a relatively small signal, about 20 Volts, on the muscles of sadness: Arthur feels a tinge of sadness. Now, a somewhat larger signal, about 25 Volts: Arthur’s sadness starts to get serious. Now I increase the signal once more. You see? Now the signal is about 30 Volts, and Arthur feels really miserable. This is what we call *expression*.

Harry’s proposition is that through such an operation, the face might come to serve as an interface between the biological and the digital. If computers are able to read and understand facial expressions (as corresponding to a specific voltage applied to a particular muscle, for instance), he reasons, then this will open the way for smoother and more nuanced communication across the hardware/wetware divide. Not only would machines be able to comprehend the “parameter settings” of human subjects more accurately, but there would also be the potential for computers to communicate their parameter settings to humans, possibly through the mediation of an embodied avatar wired up to Elsenaar’s facial muscle control system.

The immediate effect of the performance is overwhelmingly comical, not least as a result of Elsenaar’s facial contortions, which scarcely resemble the emotive expressions they are supposed to reproduce. The joke, it seems, is upon Harry – his mechanistic approach to facial expressivity yields only grotesque parodies of the classic emotive expressions, whilst his “computational perspective” leads him to naively suppose that the act of electrically stimulating the facial muscles actually produces the internal state it is supposed to communicate. Indeed, his emphasis on human-computer communication seems lamentably misguided. In what sense can “communication” be said to take place here, when Elsenaar’s facial expressions are produced neither by his brain, his nervous system, or his conscious self? What we witness instead is a narcissistic loop, in which the human face is simply a transparent vector for signals which both originate and terminate with the computer.

It is at precisely this point, however, where the implications of Harry and Elsenaar’s performance start to become more complex. On one level, we could view *Huge Harry* as a satire which lampoons our common-sense understanding of the face as a transparent window on the subjectivity of the other. When we read the faces of others, aren’t we, like Harry, trapped in a narcissistic loop, closed off from the incommensurability of our interlocutor by our tendency to reify their expressivity as a discrete emotional or internal state? Equally, the lecture pokes fun at crude neurobiological approaches to facial expression and emotion, which likewise hypostasize emotions as discrete states by linking them to a static muscular configuration – don’t the catalogues of “human emotion” produced by classificatory frameworks such as Paul Ekman’s FACS (“Facial Action Coding System”) denature both emotion and the face just as grotesquely as Elsenaar’s device?

The most radical implications of the performance, however, are more easily grasped when we look past Harry’s (extremely prescient) technoconsumerist bromides about interfacing and communication, and focus on what it materially accomplishes. Early on in the lecture, Harry complains that, in comparison to machines, whose parameters and states are always clearly and discretely coded, humans are like a “black box.” This obscurity, which is not simply a property or an epiphenomenon of subjective interiority but the very grounds of its possibility, interrupts and frustrates the smooth passage of information across the boundary between hardware and wetware. The achievement of Elsenaar’s “facial muscle control system” is to remove this kink in the communicative process by jettisoning the “black box” completely. By applying electrical stimulation directly to the muscles of the face, Elsenaar removes not just the subject, but also the nervous system and the brain – an utterly revolutionary gesture. The face no longer acquires its form and meaning from the subject which inheres “beneath” or “behind” it, but receives it by virtue of its place within a larger communicative network. The individuated body is simply a medium for the transmission of a message, and the significance of that message is dictated not by the ontology or intentionality of a subject, but by the prerogatives which determine the network’s overall structure.

With this in mind, Harry’s “computational perspective” actually provides us with an extremely rich insight into the nature of faciality in general. As Elsenaar puts it in his PHD thesis, *Facial Hacking: The Twisted Logic of Electro-Facial Choreography*, “It is crucial to realize that the face as an extension of a system, here a digital computation system, inherits the characteristics and capabilities of that system.”[[538]](#footnote-538) Insofar as the face has inherent properties, so far as Elsenaar is concerned, they consist purely of its capacities as an *interface*, its ability to mediate between different forms of information. The way in which these capacities are actualized is dependent upon the system within which they are located. One system which has been accorded much priority in the discussion and study of the human face (even as it has remained resolutely illegible to positivistic investigation) is the “face-to-face encounter”, in which the human face is understood to mediate between the internal psychological or emotional states of two or more individuated subjectivities. The startling revelation of *Huge Harry* is that there is nothing inevitable about this system. The face can quite happily be extracted from it, and made to function in another system, under completely different operating conditions. And so, if we have ever found ourselves inclined to claim that it is a property of the face to express emotion or subjectivity, we have committed a category error. We have mistaken the characteristics of the system as a whole for the properties of one of its parts.

Elsenaar’s subsequent work is dedicated primarily to extending and refining his exploration of the artistic consequences of this insight. Pieces such as *The Varieties of Human Facial Expression (12 Bit Version)* (1997), *Arthur and the Solenoids* (1997), *Morphology/Face Shift* (2005), *Electric Eigen-Portraits* (2007) and *Raw Lab Experiments: Deploying the Language of Facial E-Motion* (2009) are all essentially elaborations of a technique which he has named “facial hacking” – the systematic exploration of the extra-expressive capacities of the repurposed hardware formerly known as the human face. This is a tripartite process of “decoding” (analysing the muscular structure of the face), “encoding” (rewiring this structure to a new purpose) and “recoding” (the analysis, contextualisation and politicization of the rewired face).[[539]](#footnote-539)

One of his ultimate ambitions is to develop what he winningly calls a “Language of Facial E-motion” (with the term “E-motion” highlighting both the electrical origin of the expressions produced and the fundamental importance of facial *mobility*, as opposed to the static face). At its most abstract, this language consists of “the topological analysis of the face into structural components…and theoretical logic operations on sets of actuators; a choreologic of the face.”[[540]](#footnote-540) In other words, a set of sites which are amenable to electrical stimulation, and the range of operations which can be performed upon those sites. These operations include not just the contraction of muscles in a particular direction, but also the intensity, duration and speed of these contractions, amongst other variables. By experimenting with applying different operations to different sets of muscles, Elsenaar has developed what he calls a “Muscle Matrix Notation” – a provisional catalogue of choreographic units not unlike the movements or gestures which make up a formalized dance. These include the “lip flip”, the “nose loop” the “face flop” and the “face crush”. The piece *Morphology/Face Shift* consists of a video of many of these choreographic moves, in the latter part with musical accompaniment.[[541]](#footnote-541)

The experience of watching a piece like *Morphology/Face Shift* is by equal turns frustrating, confusing, hilarious, nauseating, bizarre, boring and physically uncomfortable. Facial expression is broken down into clusters of muscle, which are then activated according to a logic of spatial oppositions and parallels and rhythmic contrasts. Whenever a semi-recognizable expression seems about to emerge from the pulsating mass of tics and spasms, it is immediately quashed by an unreadable slack-jawed gurn. Altogether, the piece as a whole (clocking in at almost fifty minutes) adds up to a rigorous and extensive exploration of the motile capacities of the face *beyond the scope of expression*. Within a certain range, some of the movements that Elsenaar exhibits can plausibly be related to certain broadly understood facial expressions, but at its outer limits, his performance displays an array of facial motions and postures that can be related to no projected inner space whatsoever. Their significance can be grasped anatomically (as an exploration of the properties of the facial musculature) or aesthetically (in terms of patterns of form and movement), but not expressively.

Not content to decouple facial behaviour from expression and subjectivity, Elsenaar’s device is actually capable of producing movements and poses which the human brain is incapable of producing, voluntarily or otherwise. As he puts it:

Voluntary or involuntary, the biochemical origin of neural operation is the delimiting factor in how the facial actuators can be orchestrated. Biochemical neural processes are quite slow, they have a temporal resolution in the millisecond range and lack operational consistency. In contrast digital computer systems can be programmed instantaneously with ease, where its operation is completely deterministic. Digital systems further are much speedier than their neural counterpart, with speeds in the range of nanoseconds. Consequently temporal accuracy and consistency of operation are superior qualities of digital systems.” “If a “regime change” is allowed from neural to digital, it is to be expected facial performance could be extended by these superior properties. Indeed, my work has shown external digital control over the facial muscles increases accuracy and consistency of facial behavior.[[542]](#footnote-542)

In Elsenaar’s work, the face not only transcends the subject, but also the human brain and nervous system. Not only does he see this state of “artifaciality” as offering superior speed, accuracy and consistency, he also presents it as a liberation from “a despicable situation, the tyranny of brain over face.”[[543]](#footnote-543) Torn loose from its neural moorings, control over the face is placed in the hands of the cyborg, as a site of unprecedented artistic and communicative explorations.

In this fashion, perhaps more radically than any other artist, philosopher or activist to date, Elsenaar has realized Deleuze and Guattari’s call to “dismantle the face.” By rewiring the face through the agency of the computer network, Elsenaar smashes the “white wall/black hole” structure, linking the capacity to signify with the presence of a subject, which is at the foundation of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “faciality.” Furthermore, by decoupling facial movement from the organising structures of the subject and the brain, Elsenaar *concretely* allows “faciality traits” to escape from the face, perhaps opening the possibility for “strange true becomings.” Watching a piece like *Morphology/Face Shift*, we are exposed to an experience of the face which has seemingly nothing to do with political projects of faciality – the organisation of affects and the control of subjectivities.

Elsenaar is certainly well aware of the potential politics of his artistic practice. As well as noting (immodestly perhaps, but not inaccurately) that Deleuze and Guattari would “roll over in joy at this exquisite example of their *Body Without Organs* concept”, he also pinpoints two particular political significances. First of all, by “emancipating the facial display from the brain”, his device creates the grounds for “freedom of facial expression” – that is, the capacity for all cyborgs to exercise total autonomy over their facial movement and poses. Secondly, since “any external process can have unrestricted access to a possibly remote facial display”, the face is “made communist”, resulting in a “democratization of facial access.”[[544]](#footnote-544)

To give Elsenaar his due, it is not entirely obvious whether these breezy Web 1.0 bromides are meant sincerely or are rather intended as a satire of the political vacuity of the nineties’ cyber-revolution. Regardless of the degree to which we should take him seriously, the parallel with the early days of the World Wide Web is instructive. This was, after all, a story of a putatively revolutionary phenomenon whose technological possibilities and libertarian rhetoric were almost immediately co-opted by the forces of capital. Likewise, the project of dismantling the face, as Elsenaar presents it, may amount to no more than the restatement of a process which is already in train, and moreover driven forward by some of the most powerful elements of our current conjuncture. If it proves to be in the interests of neoliberal capital to deconstruct the system of faciality by disarticulating the face from the subject, the better for it to serve as an instrument of control, then it is difficult to see what can be gained by acclaiming or attempting to accelerate that project. Neither does a return to faciality seem possible or desirable. To indicate a way forward from this impasse is no easy task; nonetheless, a few preliminary gestures in this direction will be suggested in the next, and concluding, section.

**Conclusion: Post-facial Tactics**

If they think you’re crude, go technical; if they think you’re technical, go crude. I’m a very technical boy. So I decided to get as crude as possible.

William Gibson, “Johnny Mnemonic”

**A Very Technical Boy**

In the opening passages of William Gibson’s short story “Johnny Mnemonic”, the titular hero prepares himself for a meeting with his erstwhile employer Ralfi Face, an underworld middleman who, Johnny suspects, now wants him dead. The rub, it transpires, is the “hundreds of megabytes stashed in [Johnny’s] head on an idiot/savant basis.” His line of work is as a walking memory dump, with clients paying a premium to store sensitive data on a hard drive implanted in his cranium, accessible only with a password which must be delivered verbally. Johnny himself remains oblivious to his contents. Except this time, he will discover, the data he carries has been stolen from the Yakuza, and they are determined to recover it even (or more like, especially) at the expense of his life. Ralfi, being the unfortunate responsible for fencing the contraband data in the first place, is hoping that offering Johnny up to the mobsters will be enough to square away his transgression.

Johnny’s first move is to stuff a sawn-off shotgun into a gym bag padded out with socks, a slit cut into the side for his trigger hand. “If they think you’re crude, go technical; if they think you’re technical, go crude. I’m a very technical boy. So I decided to get as crude as possible,” he explains. His second is to get plastic surgery, transforming himself into “your basic sharp-face Caucasoid with a ruff of stiff, dark hair.” [[545]](#footnote-545) In the end, neither tactic proves particularly effective. Ralfi negates the shotgun by discharging a “neural disruptor”, temporarily depriving Johnny of muscle control and rendering him incapable of squeezing the trigger. The surgery likewise seems to have been a waste of money, since Ralfi somehow fingers Johnny the second he sits down opposite him. Although in fairness it ought to be noted here that Johnny halfway expects Ralfi (himself no stranger to the scalpel, as indicated by his sobriquet) to see through his new face. The real point of the surgery was only to create the moment’s confusion required to get him close enough to deploy the shotgun-in-gym-bag phase of his plan.

How is it that Ralfi is able to recognise Johnny so quickly, when his face has been transformed so as to render him unrecognisable? Or to put it another way, what has become of the human face, when such a transformation can seem so superficial and so trivial? In order to answer these questions, we first need to pay some attention to the socio-technological conditions that characterise the universe of Gibson’s early fiction (the setting for the “Sprawl Trilogy”, comprising the novels *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, as well as the short story collection *Burning Chrome*). The world of these fictions is a globalized megalopolis, its socioeconomic order sustained by the constant circulation of narcotics, bodily organs, consumer and military tech, entrepreneurial violence and information-capital known as “biz.” Power is concentrated in the hands of vast multinational corporations, organised crime syndicates, and the police/military, the latter seeming to be all that remains of the nation-state as it was known to the twentieth century. The distribution of class and racial privilege within this society is a little too complicated to begin grappling with here, but in general the majority of people persist as part of a massive global underclass, wherein life, thrills, and biotechnological enhancement come both cheap and violent.[[546]](#footnote-546)

The most famous feature of this universe is, of course, “cyberspace”, the notorious coinage which has cemented Gibson’s status as an oracle of late-capitalist technoculture:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts…A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding…[[547]](#footnote-547)

Cyberspace is a three-dimensional geometric representation of a digital computer network as experienced by an individual end user (typically, in Gibson’s work, some kind of hacker). To put it bluntly, it’s the internet, visualized in the form of a primitive video game in which the player, represented as a cursor, navigates blocks of data whose layout corresponds to the institutions, organisations or individuals who have proprietary access to them, enclosed by the walls of their security programs, known in the hacker’s argot as “ice.” The distribution of these clumps seems to mirror their geographic location in the real world, so that cyberspace resembles, as the above passage indicates, an American cityscape at night, with avenues, blocks, skyscrapers and so on, marked out in bright neon grids.

This topological mirroring might seem to suggest that cyberspace is an abstraction from the “real world” which determines its structure, but in fact the case is much closer to the reverse. Throughout the course of Gibson’s various Sprawl fictions, the most fundamental political, economic and narrative actions all occur within the cyberspace matrix, their ramifications structuring the course of events in the material world, even down to the street level hustle which provides so much of Gibson’s *mise-en-scène*. This is explicitly reflected in the experience of Case, the hacker protagonist of *Neuromancer*. In the novel’s opening sections, Case is prevented from entering cyberspace by the aftereffects of a brain-scarring mycotoxin, inflicted upon him by disgruntled former employers. Reduced to the life of a small-time fence and drug dealer on the streets of Night City, he consoles himself by observing that:

[In] some weird and very approximate way it was like a run in the matrix. Get just wasted enough to find yourself in some desperate but strangely arbitrary kind of trouble, and it was possible to see Ninsei as a field of data, the way the matrix had once reminded him of proteins linking to distinguish cell specialities…all around you the dance of biz, information interacting, data made flesh in the mazes of the black market…[[548]](#footnote-548)

This passage vividly illustrates the manner in which cyberspace has seeped into the cultural imaginary of the Sprawl universe. All social relations, even the most violent and grimy, are ultimately conceivable as and reducible to information exchange.

**Cybernetic Fictions**

Johnny, meanwhile, has no idea precisely what kind of contraband is being stored in his cyborg brain, but he takes his best guess:

It was probably research data, the Yakuza being given to advanced forms of industrial espionage. A genteel business, stealing from Ono-Sendai as a matter of course and politely holding their data for ransom, threatening to blunt the conglomerate’s research edge by making the product public.[[549]](#footnote-549)

From the perspective of both the mob and the “legitimate” corporation, their potential profit lies in manipulating the passage of this data from restricted to unrestricted networks, their business consisting effectively in withholding, exchanging or purloining the concepts, designs and blueprints which lay out the next six months’ worth of novelty on consumer and military tech markets – in other words, in managing the transaction of data into information. This is the fundamental *agon* of the story, without which none of the rest of its action would take place, an order of priorities which is replicated on a larger scale in *Neuromancer*. The whole complex apparatus of the novel’s heist storyline, featuring kidnappings, infiltrations, industrial sabotage, burglary and murder, is undertaken solely in the service of enabling Case to consummate the scheme from within the matrix. All of the story’s “real-world” action is effectively an epiphenomenon of the true drama, which consists of nothing more than Case executing the protocols set out for him by Wintermute, the Artificial Intelligence whose masterplan drives the narrative. Not only is this “procedural” level the most fundamental in terms of organising and motivating the novel’s narrative and its characters, it is also (and this is perhaps Gibson’s most startling achievement) the most visceral and compelling, flinging the reader into the matrix through a wormhole of lysergic, kaleidoscopic prose that the author has been largely unwilling or unable to replicate in his later writing.[[550]](#footnote-550)

This formal hierarchy is entirely analogous to the structure of political and economic causality in the Sprawl universe. Cyberspace is not merely a graphical representation of knowledge, actors and relations that exist in the material world; it is the primary field in which these factors are determined and transformed. The relocation of a small block of data at the cyberspace level can set off a complex chain of requisitions, deals, intrigues, appropriations and violence in the so-called real world – as indeed we witness in the plot of “Johnny Mnemonic.” In this sense, the world of the Sprawl embodies, *par excellence*, the “cybernetic society” described in Tiqqun’s “Cybernetic Hypothesis” and by critics such as Gilles Deleuze and Seb Franklin. This is, as Franklin puts it, “a sociocultural-economic system in which the supposedly frictionless movement of information functions as a sovereign subject,”[[551]](#footnote-551) a social order in which all forms of interaction are conceived in terms of a network of managed flows between discrete nodes, inputs and outputs, programming and execution, steering, modulation, and a whole repertoire of other concepts borrowed from cybernetics and computing. It is in this regard that Gibson’s vision seems to approach most closely the conditions of what we have come to know as the late or neoliberal phase of capitalism, and specifically the “society of control” as imagined by Deleuze in the previous chapter.

**The Procedural Subject**

We are now in a position to return to the question posed a few pages back, with regard to the apparent failure of Johnny’s face-changing ploy. Ralfi’s ability to almost instantaneously recognize Johnny in spite of the total transformation of his face points to a set of fundamental shifts in the nature of the subject, identity and faciality under control society. Deleuze claimed that in the society of control, the individual is replaced by the “dividual”[[552]](#footnote-552), a transition which Franklin parses as a shift to a subject divided within itself, “broken down into discrete parts that are each representable as symbolic tokens and capturable as labor…productivity, appearance, genetic traits, lifestyle preferences, and cultural and creative faculties,” or to put it more concisely, “the replacement of the subject by data models.”[[553]](#footnote-553) This subject is no longer to be conceived of as a whole, bounded within a closed and unitary mind-body and metonymized by a face; instead, it is inductively extrapolated from the traces it leaves across a broad spectrum of metric registers, from geolocation to phone records to search history to the Amazon wish-list. Rather than a being with a set of internally consistent qualities, the properties of the dividual are understood in terms of its position within a series of graphs mapping patterns of movement, communication, consumption and other quantifiable activities.

This mutation in the nature of the subject in the control society is mirrored by a commensurate shift in the concept of identity and the means through which subjects are identified. Media theorist Christoph Engemann describes this as a transition from what he calls “declarative” to “procedural” identity.[[554]](#footnote-554) The notion of “declarative identity” describes the process by which a nation-state produces and “declares *ex-ante*”, the identity of an individual through the creation of an administrative double which is indexed directly to the body of the person in question. This double is produced out of a “media ensemble” largely comprised of paper documents such as birth certificates, passports and so on, but also analogue media such as the photograph. The photograph of the face, in fact, seems to have a crucial role to play in the production of “declarative identity”, since it provides a reliable, replicable and administratively expedient means of sealing this bond between the body and its administrative double – a function that we see in all forms of photo-ID descended from the system devised by Bertillon in the late nineteenth century. In a traditional (i.e. non-biometric) passport, for instance, the photograph of the face is the symbolic keystone of the whole operation, drawing together all of the measurements contained therein and imprinting it upon the body of the individual on the strength of their visual correspondence.

“Procedural identity”, meanwhile, denotes a process of identification which is becoming increasingly fundamental to the control society. As Engemann describes, “it is not declared *ex-ante*, but…states develop and maintain an elaborate set of procedures which aims to generate identities over time and keep them permanently actualised.” In other words, “procedural identity” is induced *ex-post* through a process of data capture, aggregation and graphing. Borrowing from a presentation by IT consultancy firm Gartner entitled “The Competitive Dynamics of the Consumer Web: Five Graphs Deliver a Sustainable Advantage”, Engemann lists five different forms of graphing used to generate procedural identities – the Social Graph (owned by Facebook and Twitter), the Intent Graph (Google, Ebay), the Consumption Graph (Amazon), the Interest Graph (Google) and the Mobile Graph (Apple, along with other mobile services such as WhatsApp), whilst mentioning that a sixth, Productivity Graph (linked to use of Microsoft Office) may also be in the offing. Altogether these graphs can be combined to build a picture of a person’s interests, their habits and their connections with other people, all in the service of optimizing web marketing strategies and consumer interfaces. The data used to build these graphs is, of course, harvested from the history of an individual’s interactions with the various online platforms listed above. As Johnny puts it, with what seems now like remarkable prescience, “it’s impossible to move, to live, to operate at any level without leavings traces, bits, seemingly meaningless fragments of personal information. Fragments that can be retrieved, amplified…”[[555]](#footnote-555)

The concept of “procedural identity” demonstrates just one of the senses in which Alexander Galloway is right to claim that “there is no “faciality” with the computer.”[[556]](#footnote-556) It isn’t simply that “procedural identity” constitutes a means of recognizing individuals without reference to their face, their visual appearance or indeed any bodily or biometric factor. More profoundly, it destroys the very grounds upon which the “signifying subjectivity” of faciality was based. As Tiqqun have argued, a cybernetic approach to identity depends precisely upon the “hollowing out” of the subject, the rejection of “individual inwardness/internal dialogue” as “myth”, and the obliteration of the “depth model” of the subject inherited from 19th century psychology.[[557]](#footnote-557) From the perspective of a system which seeks to identify, track and predict the behaviour of individuals on the basis of the traces they leave in digital networks, the interiorized subject is a black-box, not merely irrelevant but noisy and disruptive. The notion of a unitary subject which persists “inside” or “beneath” the external appearance and behaviour of a person, with a repertoire of personal qualities, a symbolically mediated past history and a complex system of psychodynamic drives is replaced by a node in a graph, understood solely in terms of its inputs and outputs. If, as Deleuze and Guattari have attempted to show, the face has always been part of a semiotic system dedicated to producing “signifying subjectivities”, what remains of it once the latter has been rendered void? When there is no “inside”, no homunculus, no “soul”, there is simply nothing left for the face to reveal.

So, has the face been entirely erased by such a system? Not exactly. The role that remains for the face in such a procedural media ensemble is hinted at by a document entitled “Image Is Everything”, a PowerPoint presentation produced for staff of the National Security Agency some time around 2012, and available to the public as part of the Snowden leaks. The aim of the presentation is to expound the concept of “Identity Intelligence”, which is defined as “exploiting pieces of information that are unique to an individual to track, exploit and identify targets of interest.” It divides the kinds of information which are useful for these purposes into three categories:

* **Biometric/Biologic** – “Data that shows an individual’s physical or behavioral traits: Face, iris, fingerprints, voice, gait.”
* **Biographic** – “Data that documents an individual’s life history: Name, DOB, address, school, military.”
* **Contextual/Behavioral** – “Data that captures an individual’s interactions with the external world: Travel, financial, behaviors, social network.”[[558]](#footnote-558)

As this list indicates, the face still has a role to play within identification – but only as a single subcategory of a tripartite system of informatic measurement, not necessarily more significant than gait, address, or social networking. The face has lost its unique privileges as the controlling metonym of identity and selfhood.

**Faciality Rewired**

It is now essential to mention, perhaps a little belatedly, the other socio-technological fact which would seem at first to be the most obvious explanation for the ease with which Ralfi sees through Johnny’s false face – the complete ubiquity of cheap plastic surgery. Bodily reconstruction and augmentation are just as fundamental to the Gibsonian universe and its narrative scaffolds as cyberspace. One of the first pieces of world-building information we receive in *Neuromancer*, for instance, concerns the legendary ugliness of the cyborg barowner Ratz: “In an age of affordable beauty, there was something heraldic about it.”[[559]](#footnote-559) From this point, we learn rapidly about the numerous clinics, the traffic in organs and nanotechnology, and the “vat-grown” flesh displayed in the storefronts of Night City. Meanwhile, in the opening of the second Sprawl novel, *Count Zero*, the mercenary Turner is reconstructed more or less from scratch after an unfortunate encounter with an exploding attack-dog.[[560]](#footnote-560) The entire procedure is covered by his insurance. One of the main narrative threads of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, the third instalment, turns upon a plot to kidnap global megastar Angie Mitchell and replace her with a surgically confected double. At one point Mona, the proposed doppelgänger, listens to a friend explain that “she didn’t have ten percent of her own face left, the one she’d been born with.”[[561]](#footnote-561) The disclosure elicits nothing more than the kind of polite approval we usually reserve for someone who’s been making good use of their gym membership.

In the globalised society of the Sprawl universe therefore, and particularly in the criminal underworld inhabited by Johnny and Ralfi, the facial features of any particular body are totally fungible. On this basis, the reasons for Ralf’s suspicion of Johnny’s false face seem perfectly obvious. Bearing in mind the ease with which it can be transformed, it is simply not a very reliable means of identifying an adversary. However, it’s essential to recognize that this fluid relationship between face and identity is not solely predicated upon the technical possibilities of facial surgery. More fundamentally, it is grounded in a model of subjectivity which no longer posits a unified, sovereign self “beneath”, “inside” or “behind”, which the face must metonymize. It is only through the cybernetic rewiring of subjectivity that the face is released from its task of expressing or representing this unique and unified interiority, and only at this point of release that it is truly opened up as a field of radical plasticity. In this respect, it is surely no coincidence that the matrix is presented as a place where faces are aggregated (“a hundred faces from the neon forest”)[[562]](#footnote-562), commensurated with other forms of data (“Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information”)[[563]](#footnote-563) and ultimately ecstatically obliterated:

[His] orgasm flaring blue in a timeless space, a vastness like the matrix, where the faces were shredded and blown away down hurricane corridors, and her inner thighs strong and wet against his hips.[[564]](#footnote-564)

The fungibility of the physical features of the human face and body is merely the material repercussion of shifts which have already taken place at the cyberspace level.

It is now possible for us to make the following statement: Ralfi is able to recognize Johnny in spite of his facial transformation, because Johnny’s facial appearance simply isn’t a particularly significant part of the identification process. Thinking back to Engemann’s distinction, the means through which Ralfi identifies Johnny are much more “procedural” than “declarative”, much more to do with the tracing, tracking and prediction of behaviour than with the location and corroboration of a subject. More than anything else, it is Ralfi’s position within and knowledge of the info-economic network within which he and Johnny operate that allows him to be so confident that it is in fact Johnny who walks into the bar where he conducts his business and takes the seat opposite him, even if he wears the face of “Eddie Bax” (the alias that Johnny concocts for the operation).

As the middleman between Johnny and his clientele, Ralfi’s role is to act as an information bottleneck, insulating Johnny from the people who use his services and their competition/enemies. This is essential if Johnny is to properly serve his function as an inaccessible and interruptive node of secrecy within a system whose overall functioning depends upon instantaneous connectivity, ubiquitous transparency and the smooth flow of information. In his role as middleman, Ralfi is placed securely at the fat end of an information asymmetry, wise to the structure of the network and the placement of its various nodes. Ralfi knows that the data stored in Johnny’s implant has been stolen from the Yakuza, and he knowsthat his only chance of survival is to offer Johnny up as a patsy. Moreover, he knows that Johnny is suspicious, whilst simultaneously knowing that he is the only source through which Johnny can clarify his understanding of the situation. Johnny will have to come to him, on his turf and on his terms. Add to this a general familiarity with Johnny’s needs, capacities and habits, and Ralfi finds himself in an extremely strong position from which to predict Johnny’s behaviour.

Armed with this knowledge, Ralfi is left with a simple task of probabilistic calculation. Knowing what he does, he can with considerable confidence assume that a convergence of interests, means and necessities will inevitably at some point place Johnny (probably wielding some sort of firearm) in the seat opposite. And so he plans for this eventuality, taping the “neural disruptor” which will disable Johnny’s trigger finger under the opposite side of the table before he’s even arrived in the bar. In this sense, the identity of Johnny is not so much a designation which he carries around with him, grounded in his body or his personality, but a role into which he steps the minute he enters into this particular encounter. Identification, in other words, is triggered not by facial appearance, but by the execution of a set of behaviours which acquire their significance within a network of relations of which Ralfi, in this instance, is the master. It is the network which makes Johnny recognizable, not his face.

**New Uses for an Old Technology**

If all this is true, why even bother with this facial subterfuge? Johnny is no naïf; as already noted he actually expects Ralfi to see through his disguise. The answer is that the ploy was never really intended to convince Ralfi in the first place. Its rationale is not that of secrecy, but “obfuscation.” In their book on the subject, Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum define obfuscation as “the deliberate addition of ambiguous, confusing, or misleading information to interfere with surveillance and data collection.”[[565]](#footnote-565) Crucially, obfuscation is a “weapon of the weak”[[566]](#footnote-566), a strategy to be employed when it is not possible or realistic to avoid tracking and surveillance, and when we find ourselves on the thin end of the “*information asymmetry*…when data about us are collected in circumstances we many not understand, for purposes we may not understand, and are used in ways we may not understand.”[[567]](#footnote-567) Obfuscation is ideally suited to somebody in Johnny’s position.

Brunton and Nissenbaum catalogue an extensive repertoire of obfuscation techniques, from the use of radar chaff in Second World War bombers to various online apps designed to confound geolocation and data harvesting to the Orb-weaving Spider, which festoons its web with replicas of itself spun together from collected detritus in order to confound predatory wasps. The behaviour of the spider is emblematic of obfuscation in that it is purely a delaying tactic. Once the wasp chooses to attack a replica, the illusion is revealed. But then this was entirely the point, the goal being simply to confuse the wasp long enough to buy the spider time to react.[[568]](#footnote-568) Johnny’s face switching behaviour is much the same. He never expects to fool Ralfi entirely; only to create enough confusion to maybe get the drop on him. The shotgun serves a similar purpose. Recall the mantra that Johnny uses to rationalise his plan: “If they think you’re crude, go technical; if they think you’re technical, go crude. I’m a very technical boy. So I decided to get as crude as possible.”

Ralfi’s strategy depends upon his ability to accurately track, predict and plan for Johnny’s actions. Johnny knows that, from his position of weakness, he cannot entirely prevent this from happening. What he can do is to attempt to kick against the assumptions upon which Ralfi makes his analysis, deliberately subverting his reputation as “a very technical boy” by resorting to two self-consciously atavistic ploys – the shotgun and the face. It is not necessarily to be expected that either of these will decide the struggle in themselves; rather, Johnny hopes, they will disrupt Ralfi’s calculations long enough for him to reactively seize the upper hand. Johnny’s face-changing needs to be understood within this context – not so much as a wholesale switching of identities, but a more limited and speculative shuffling of personal data, designed to delay, to sow confusion, to obfuscate.

Johnny’s use of obfuscation suggests that as one relationship between the face and the self comes to an end, others are beginning. Once the face has ceased to function as the metonym of a subject, further uses recommend themselves. Johnny’s facial obfuscation is just one instance we could select from Gibson’s fiction. Within “Johnny Mnemonic” alone there are several other examples. Ralfi, for instance, has his face styled after his favourite celebrity Sony Mao, also known as Christian White, frontman of the Aryan Reggae Band. Molly Millions, the mercenary who eventually extricates Johnny from his deadly quandary, has a pair of mirrored lenses surgically inlaid over her eyes, partly a form of defensive self-fashioning, partly a piece of market-savvy brand construction. The Lo-Teks, meanwhile, are a gang who use surgical transformations to create a collective aesthetic based around exotic mutilations and animalistic enhancements. One member, by the name of Dog, sports a “thick length of grayish tongue” and “tooth-bud transplants from Dobermans.”[[569]](#footnote-569) In each of these contexts, the face still signifies, is still read, but in an entirely different way than that to which we are accustomed. Faces are used to display one’s cultural investments, to send a message to enemies and potential clients, to signal one’s membership within a particular collective, or to confuse one’s adversary. They are, we might say, merely one element of an individual profile, rather than a symbolic representation of a subjective whole.

One of the chief fascinations of “Johnny Mnemonic”, and of Gibson’s early fiction in general, is that it allows us a glimpse of what we might call a “post-facial culture”, a socio-technological order in which “faciality” as we know it has been overturned and replaced by a new regime. The face has lost its old privileges as the sole metonym of an individuated and unified self, partly because of a new technological capacity to transform or augment it, but more fundamentally because the definition of subjectivity upon which this model of faciality was based is now obsolete. Faces now get their meaning from their position within a networked set of relations. They can be a strategic tool, a fashion statement, a piece of marketing, a potential vulnerability or a site of resistance. They can be scanned, logged and tracked, but they can also be transformed for obfuscatory purposes (just don’t expect your face to *fool* anyone). No longer can a face be said to have a special or unique relationship with a particular self, except through a compelling but delusive nostalgia.

On the one hand, the face under these conditions can seem to offer a new field of freedom, liberated from the forms dictated by the “faciality machine.” On the other, it can just as easily be figured as one more behaviour amongst many, another output to be surveilled and graphed. What is clear is that this move to “post-faciality” has not in itself brought about the kind of ecstatic “becomings” depicted by Deleuze and Guattari; nor has it engendered the more respectful and caring forms of intersubjectivity imagined by Edkins. The society of the Sprawl universe is materialistic, violent and uncaring, with all individuals engaged in an entrepreneurial death struggle, aiming to secure survival over the dead bodies of their fellows. The native faciality of this culture is entirely commensurate to this form of life – faces are worn, looked at and exchanged in the hope of duping a rival, scoring an edge or making a sale. Only at the fringes of this economy, buried deep in the instinctual, affective lives of certain of Gibson’s protagonists, are there hints that the face might function as part of some kind of ethical interrelation.

**Postfaciality**

Gibson’s characters, typically a rabble of resilient naïfs, nihilistic burnouts and thick-skulled mercenaries, are not exactly inspiring political role models. Nonetheless, I want to suggest that there is something from we can learn from their savvy flexibility, their ability to adapt to circumstances, their lack of sentimentality with regards to the rubble of the old world. Gibson’s fiction, I claim, contains scattered within it a blueprint for how the face can function as an element of a new tactics of subjectivity, based around agility, pragmatism and obfuscation. This would not be a practice founded in the complacent belief that the face is something that we can transcend or escape, but based on the realisation that precisely to the extent that it is used to mark and order us from without, the face becomes a tool that we can wield contextually and self-consciously against the power that inscribes us. A modest weapon, and certainly ineffectual on its own, but nonetheless, any attempt to recruit one’s face to a tactics of resistance constitutes an immanent assertion of our right to facial autonomy against those who would claim them as the source of a behavioural surplus or a site of control.

The present is not devoid of useful examples in this regard. We have already encountered the work of Zach Blas, but there are others. In 2014, the artist Adam Harvey launched CVDazzle, an open-source toolkit of facial camouflage, incorporating hairstyles, cosmetics and accessories designed to interfere with the pattern-recognition capabilities of AFA devices.[[570]](#footnote-570) Meanwhile, biohacker Heather Dewey-Hagborg has produced a range of works investigating the relationship between the face and digital technologies, including *Stranger Visions*, a project in which she used DNA phenotyping software to produce 3D images of faces based on DNA traces she collected from cigarette butts and wads of chewed gum harvested from the streets of New York. Her most important work with regard to our current discussion is *Probably Chelsea*, a collaboration with the US military whistle-blower and transparency activist Chelsea Manning in which Hagborg produced thirty different 3D portraits from a single sample of Manning’s DNA – a powerful refutation of the one-to-one relationship between face and identity.[[571]](#footnote-571) Blas is also correct to relate his work to the tactics of the black bloc and the Zapatistas, two organisations who express their rejection of the hegemonic terms of political possibility by engaging in practices of collective masking.[[572]](#footnote-572) The value of each of these artworks is that the encourage us to engage both materially and technologically with the visual media which are currently seeking to shape our experiences of our faces and the faces of others, the better to grasp how we might turn them to other purposes.

The possibility of a post-facial tactics depends upon a degree of indifference with regard to the lingering residue of faciality, but also a principled appreciation of what it is in the face that we might still value – an issue which is usefully clarified by the contemporary technologies we have referred to as Automated Facial Analytics. By seeking to transform the face so radically, they demonstrate by exclusion those parts of it which are least amenable to their purpose. If we look to what’s left of the face’s carcass after the AFA vultures have had their way with it, we will see an intersubjective form defined by dissensus, resistance and negativity, by scrambled messages and skipped connections, the point at which my right to contest and reject everything you claim to know about me begins. To be free to be only one’s face, and yet at the same time both more and less than it, may be an invaluable point of orientation for future struggles.

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67. Ibid, pp56-7. And it is always “men.” The feminine or the non-male are uniformly ignored by such schema, or else relegated to the status of sub-category or exception. For an instance of this gesture, see Lavater’s treatment of the “feminine” face in the next chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics”, trans. by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, 15 (2003), pp11-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p10. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy”, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p75. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Tom Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), p85. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. by Richard Cohen, (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2011), p68. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, repr. 2001), p68. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Sparrow, *Levinas Unhinged*, p86. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p21. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid, p21. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid, p23. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid, p39. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid, p197. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p85-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p252. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid, p147. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Ibid, p149. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid, p178. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p95. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Ibid, pp100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp198-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p100. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p8. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Quoted in Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp67-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Calarco, *Zoographies*, p65. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Ibid, p71. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Emmanuel Levinas, “Time and the Other”, in *The Levinas* Reader, pp37-58, (p41). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H.M. Parshley, (London: Vintage, 1997), p16. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Tina Chanter’s work is exemplary here. See her *Time, Death and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), as well as the edited collection *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, (Pennsylvania, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p26. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi, (London: Athlone, 1999), p170 [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Ibid, p168. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Ibid, p166. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Ibid, p170. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Ibid, p168. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Ibid, p175. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Ibid, p177. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Ibid, p177. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Ibid, p181. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Ibid, p176. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Ibid, p181. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p143. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Ibid, p7. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Ibid, pp8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Ibid, p144. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Ibid, p145. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. John Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy, Also One Hundred Physiognomical Rules and a Memoir of the Author*, trans. by Thomas Holcroft, (London: William Tegg and Co, Prancras Lane, Cheapside, 1878) Internet Archive ebook, p11. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. The anecdote of Lavater’s meeting with Joseph II is taken from a biography of the former written by his son in law, one G. Gessner, and included as part of the preamble to Holcroft’s translation of the essays. G. Gessner, “Memoirs of the Life of J.C.Lavater”, trans. by Thomas Holcroft in Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, lxxxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Ibid, Ixxxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, pp164-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. “Physiognomica”, in *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. by W.D. Ross, trans by. T. Loveday et al, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913) Internet Archive ebook, p805a. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. “Physiognomica”, p808a. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. by Michael Henry Heim, (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), p39. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. See Mark Pennick, “Facial Recognition”, in *Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development*, ed. S. Goldstein and J.A. Naglieri, (Boston MA: Springer, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Patrizia Magli, “The Face and the Soul”, in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body Part Two*, ed. Michel Feher, (New York: Urzone, 1990), p89. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Ibid, p89. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Leslie A. Zebrowitz and Joann M. Montepare, “Social Psychological Face Perception: Why Appearance Matters”, *Social Personal Psychological Compass*, 1 (2008), pp1497-1513 (p1504). [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Magli, “The Face and the Soul”, p98. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. “Physiognomica”, p806b. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. For a detailed investigation of the pre-Lavaterian physiognomic tradition, see Martin Porter, *Windows of the Soul: The Art of Physiognomy in European Culture 1470-1780*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, p141. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
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129. Ibid, p147. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Ibid, p379. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Ibid, p151. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Ibid, p54. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*, (Detroit MI: Wayne State University, 2004), xxxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Melissa Percival, “Johann Caspar Lavater: Physiognomy and Connoisseurship”, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 26 (2003), pp77-90 (pp82-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Percival, “Physiognomy and Connoisseurship”, p86. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Johann Caspar Lavater, “On Physiognomics”, Quoted in Gray, *About Face*, pp49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Alan Fridlund, *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View*, (San Diego CA: Academic Press, 1994), pp128-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Ibid, p130. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* p396. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Ibid, p481. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Gessner, “Life of J.C. Lavater”, lxxxv-lxxxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” *October* 28 (1984), pp125-133 (p130). [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man” p129. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, p148,143. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Ibid, p149. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Ibid, p146. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Ibid, pp187-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. For a description of the silhouette machine and an account of its etymology, see Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society*, trans. by David R. Godine and others, (Boston MA: David Godine, 1980), pp11-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Indeed, in 1786, a French engraver by the name of Gilles-Louis Chrétien elaborated on this principle by attaching the draftsman’s pencil to an articulated wooden frame with a stylus fixed to the opposite corner. The frame would follow the movements of the draftsman’s hand, translating the outline traced upon the paper onto another sheet of paper folded to produce multiple impressions, or even a metal plate, at a reduced size. He named this appliance the “physionotrace,” and for a brief period (basically, between its invention and the advent of photography) it became a popular means of creating miniature profiles or engravings at low costs and with barely any skill requirement. See Freund, *Photography and Society*, pp14-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Lavater, *Essays in Physiognomy*, p189. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Ibid, p188. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Gessner, “Life of J.C. Lavater”, plxxxii-lxxxiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Lavater, *Essays in Physiognomy*, p139. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Ibid, p394. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Ibid, p12. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Quoted in Gray, *About Face*, p11. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Lavater, *Essays in Physiognomy*, p145. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Ibid, p139. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. A detailed explanation of Camper’s theory in the context of eighteenth-century European anthropology can be found in Miriam Claude Meijer, *Race and Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Gray, *About Face*, pp343-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi, (London: Athlone, 1999), pp167-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. See Gray, xxxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Percival, “Physiognomy and Connoisseurship”, p87. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Gray, xxxvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. by C.J. Arthur, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970. 2007 reprint), pp83-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Ibid, p84. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. by Paul Foss and others, (Semiotext(e), 1983), p84. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990. 1991 reprint), p13. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Ibid, p23. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Ibid, p19. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Gessner, “Life of J.C. Lavater), pcx. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, p134. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Ibid, p96. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Ibid, p90. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Ibid, p92. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Ibid, p104. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Ibid, p63. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Ibid, p156. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Ibid, p156. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Freund, *Photography and Society*, p14. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Alison Smale, “Angela Merkle Calls for Ban on Full-Face Veils in Germany”, *New York Times*, 6 December 2016<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/world/europe/merkel-calls-for-ban-on-full-face-veils-in-germany.html> [accessed 28 May 2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Office of the French Prime Minister, “La République se vit à visage découvert”, <http://archives.gouvernement.fr/ayrault/gouvernement/la-republique-se-vit-a-visage-decouvert.html> [accessed 28 May 2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Quoted in Percival, “Physiognomy and Connoisseurship”, p86. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Lavater, *Essays in Physiognomy*, p40. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Ibid, p161. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Walter Benjamin, “A Little History of Photography”, in *Selected Writings: Volume 2 Part 2, 1931-1934*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone et al, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard W. Eiland % Gary Smith, (London: Belknap, 1999), pp507-528 (p513). [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. See Robert Cornelius, self-portrait; believed to be the earliest extant American portrait photo, Library of Congress Online Catalog, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004664436/> (accessed 10/10/19). [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Benjamin, “Little History”, p515. Much to Benjamin’s disgust, these baroque accessories remained a feature of photo-portraiture for some time after they were practically obsolete. He approvingly quotes the following exasperated remonstrance from an “English trade journal” of the 1860s: “in painting the pillar has some plausibility, but the way it is used in photography is absurd, since it usually stands on a carpet. But anyone can see that pillars of marble or stone are not erected on a foundation of carpeting.” [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History*, (London: Laurence King, 2002), p63. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Benjamin, “Little History”, p517. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. See Carol Johnson, “Robert Cornelius”, in *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography Volume One A-I*, ed. by John Hannavy, (London: Routledge, 2008), pp1208-1209. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Susan Sontag, “Melancholy Objects” in *On Photography*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), pp51-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Benjamin, “Little History”, p512. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema One: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, (London: Athlone, 1992), pp1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema Two: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, (London: Athlone, 1989),pxxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Deleuze, *Cinema One*, p9. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Past’s Threshold: Essays on Photography*, ed. by Phillipe Despoix and Maria Zinfert, trans. by Conor Joyce, (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2014), p37. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Ibid, pp30-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. It should be stressed here that Kracauer did not believe that photography was somehow “unmotivated.” He was well aware of “selective activities” through which a photographer shapes the image. His point is that with regards the photograph, the technical structure of photography has usurped the organisational role played by the unconscious with regards to memory, hence creating a visuality that is ordered according to principles quite apart from ordinary perception or memory. See Kracauer, *The Past’s Threshold*, pp68-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Ibid, pp73-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Kracauer, *The Past’s Threshold*, pp37-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Vol. 3: The Guermantes Way*, trans. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff, D.J. Enright and Terence Kilmartin, (London: Vintage, 1996), pp155-156.Quoted in Kracauer, *The Past’s Threshold*, p66. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Proust, *Guermantes Way* , p156.Quoted in Kracauer, *The Past’s Threshold*, p67. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster, (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp127-188. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context”, trans by. Samuel Weber, Jeffrey Mehlman and Alan Bass, in *Limited Inc*, (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p7. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Vicki Bruce and Andy Young, “Understanding Face Recognition”, *British Journal of Psychology*, 77 (1986), pp305-327 (p308). [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
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209. Daniel Black, “What is a Face?”, *Body and Society*, 17 (2011), pp1-25 (pp14-15). [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Kracauer, *The Past’s Threshold*, p40. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Ibid, p39. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Ibid, p33. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Benjamin, “Little History”, p514. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p138. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p149. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp148-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”, *October*, 39 (1986), pp3-64 (p10). [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Benjamin, “Little History”, p510. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Walter Benjamin “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn, (London: Pimlico, 1999), p182. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Benjamin, “Little History, pp515-517. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations*, p219. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society*, trans. by David R. Godine and others, (Boston MA: David Godine, 1980), p30. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Benjamin, “Little History”, p517. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. National Museum of American History, “Original Kodak Camera, Serial No. 540”, *National Museum of American History*, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_760118>. [accessed 28 May 2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Benjamin, “Little History”, p517. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Benjamin, “Little History,” p526. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, (London: Belknap, 2014), p20. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
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229. Benjamin, “Little History,” p515. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Benjamin, “Little History,” p519. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Benjamin, “Little History, pp515-517. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Benjamin, “Work of Art”, p219. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside, (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p19. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*,(London: Palgrave, 1988), p56. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works*, (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), pxv. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Jean-Louis Comolli, “Machines of the Visible”, in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. by Teresa De Lauretis and Stephen Heath, (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), pp121-142 (p121). [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. One of the proximal goals of this process was naturally the more efficient extraction of surplus value. This is clear enough in the cases of colonialism and industrialisation, but it holds too for the analysis of movement, which gave birth to various “worker efficiency” programs, the most famous and influential of which being Taylorism. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
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243. Sander Gilman, *The Face of Madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the Origin of Psychiatric Photography*, (Secaucus NJ: Citadel, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
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245. See Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
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250. G.B. Duchenne du Boulogne, *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, p20. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Ibid, p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Paul Ekman, “Duchenne and Facial Expression of Emotion”, in *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, p270. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Duchenne, *Mechanism*, p30. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
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255. Cuthbertson, “Dr. Duchenne”, p235. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Duchenne, *Mechanism*, pp4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
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258. Ibid, pp36-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Ibid, p37. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
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261. Ibid, p40. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
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263. Ibid, p120. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
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266. Ibid, pp1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi, (London: Athlone, 1999), p168. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
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280. Philip Prodger, “Illustration as Strategy in Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*”, in *Inscribing Science: Scientific Texts and the Materiality of Communication*, ed. by Timothy Lenoir, (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press), pp140-181 (p170). [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. *Sunset Boulevard*, dir. Billy Wilder, (Paramount Pictures, 1950). [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Jacques Aumont, “The Face in Close-Up”, trans. Ellen Sowchek, in *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History*, ed. Angela Della Vacche (London: Rutgers, 2003), p128. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers, (New York NY: Noonday Press, 1991), pp56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. What they actually watch is a sequence from *Queen Kelly*, an unreleased film which Swanson had made in 1928-9 with Erich Von Stroheim. Von Stroheim, of course, stars in *Sunset Boulevard* as Max, Norma’s zombified butler/former director/ex-husband. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Cecil B. DeMille, *The Cheat*, (Paramount Pictures, 1915). [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Sergei Eisenstein, *Battleship Potemkin*, (Goskino, 1925). [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Mary Ann Doane, “Ideology and the Practice of Sound Editing and Mixing”, in *The Cinematic Apparatus*, ed. by Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath, (London: Palgrave, 1980), p51. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. See Erica Carter, “Introduction”, in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone, ed. by Erica Carter, (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010),ppxxviii-xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Carter, “Introduction”, pxxiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Béla Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, p9. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p11. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Ibid, p9. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (London: Johns Hopkins, 1977), p13. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p11. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Ibid, p46. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. Ibid, p10. [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. Ibid, pp 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Ibid, p9. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context”, trans. Alan Bass in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992). p7. Of course, Derrida has extensively demonstrated the equation of speech with presence as opposed to writing-as-absence. Nonetheless, the assumption is essential to Balázs' thinking. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*,p84. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Ibid, p10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, trans. by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p49, p56. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, pp14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Carter, foonote to Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p15. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p10. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p186. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Balázs, *Early Film* Theory, p198. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. See Jean-Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus”, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 28, Issue 2 (1974), pp39-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Jean Epstein, *The Intelligence of a Machine*, trans. Trond Lundemo, in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, eds. Sarah Keller & Jason N. Paul, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), p311. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. See Malcolm Turvey, *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition*, (Oxford: OUP, 2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Vivian Sobchak, quoted in Christophe Wall-Romana, “Epstein's *Photogénie* as Corporeal Vision: Inner Sensation, Queer Embodiment, and Ethics”, in J*ean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, p64. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. See, for example, “We: Variant of a Manifesto” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brian, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp5-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. See Jean Epstein, “On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*”, in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, pp292-296. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn, (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp229-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Benjamin, “Work of Art”, p228. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p37. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Ibid, p38. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Ibid, p33. [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Ibid*,* p100. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London: Athlone, 1992), p95. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p100. Like many other critics of the day, Balázs subscribed to the popular canard that D.W. Griffith had “invented” the close-up. As will be demonstrated shortly, the close-up is as old as film itself, although insofar as he was responsible for systematizing the conventions of American narrative cinema in the mid-1910s, perhaps it is not unreasonable to credit Griffith with pioneering a novel application of the technique. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Ibid, p101. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Ibid, p29. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. We know Balázs had read at least some Lavater, since – as we are about to see – he quotes from Goethe’s contribution to Lavater’s *Physiognomical Fragments*. It is hence reasonable to assume that his omission of Lavater’s ideas was a conscious rejection rather than an ignorant oversight. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Quoted in Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p29. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Carter, “Introduction”, pxxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. John Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy, Also One Hundred Physiognomical Rules and a Memoir of the Author*, trans. by Thomas Holcroft, (London: William Tegg and Co, Prancras Lane, Cheapside, 1878) Internet Archive ebook, p40. [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p30. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone, (London: Dobson, 1952), p92. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p27. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Ibid, p36. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Ibid, p107. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Quoted in Carter, “Introduction”, pxxxv. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. See Sergei Eisenstein, “Béla Forgets the Scissors” in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor, trans. William Powell and Richard Taylor, (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp67-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Jean Epstein, “Magnification and Other Writings”, trans. Stuart Liebman, *October*, Vol. 3, (Spring 1977), p9. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Jean Epstein, “Langue d'Or”, trans. Mireille Dobrrzynski and Stuart Liebman, in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, p298. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. The early Lumière films, by contrast, ran to seventeen metres. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. John W. Douard, “E.-J. Marey’s Visual Rhetoric and the Graphic Decomposition of the Body”, *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, Volume 26, Issue 2 (1995), p188. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Tom Gunning, “In Your Face: Physiognomy, Photography, and the Gnostic Mission of Early Film”, *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol.4, No.1 (January 1997), p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Gunning, “In Your Face: Physiognomy, Photography, and the Gnostic Mission of Early Film”, p18. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. As Deleuze explains: “We can therefore define the cinema as the system which reproduces movement by relating it to the any-instant-whatever. But it is here that the difficulty arises. What is the interest of such a system? From the point of view of science, it is very slight. For the scientific revolution was one of analysis. And, if movement had to be related to the any-instant-whatever in order to analyse it, it was hard to see any interest in a synthesis or reconstitution based on the same principle, except a vague interest of confirmation.” Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema One: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson & Barbara Habberjam, (London: Athlone, 1992) p6. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Quoted in Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), pp183-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. Braun, *Picturing Time*, p180. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Tom Gunning, “Now You See It, Now You Don’t”: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions”, in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel, (London: Athlone, 1996), p75. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. US Library of Congress, *Edison Kinetoscopic Recording of a Sneeze, Jan. 7, 1894*, online video recording, March 26 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wnOpDWSbyw> [accessed 28 May 2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. James Williamson, *The Big Swallow*, online video recording, October 22 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxcVzs88xRg> [accessed 28 May 2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Georges Méliès, *A Trip to the Moon*, (Star Film Company, 1902). [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Georges Méliès, *The Impossible Voyage*, (Georges Méliès, 1904). [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Georges Méliès, *The Man With the Rubber Head*, (Georges Méliès, 1901). [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Aumont, “The Face in Close-up”, p129. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p100. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Deleuze, *Cinema One: The Movement Image*, p90. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. See Sergei Eisenstein, “Béla Forgets the Scissors” in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor, trans. William Powell and Richard Taylor, (London: British Film Institute, 1998), pp67-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today”, in *Film Form:Essays in Film Form*, ed. Jay Leyda, (London: Harcourt, 1949) p224 [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Of course, for Balázs this essentializing, transhistorical quality was precisely the point. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today”, pp237-8. The Russian “large scale” is synonymous with the French *gros plan*. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Ibid, p238. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Lev Kuleshov, “Fifty Years in Films”, in *Fifty Years in Films: Selected Works*, trans. E.S. Khokhlova, (Moscow: Raduga, 1987). p211 It is notable that the contents of the shots differs in each different account of the experiment. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Stephen Prince & Wayne E. Hensley, “The Kuleshov Effect: Recreating the Classic Experiment”, *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Winter 1922), p68. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Ibid, pp63-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. John Ralmon, “Béla Balázs in German Exile”, *Film Quarterly*, 30.3 (1977), pp 12-19, (p16). [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife*, (London: Harvard University Press, 1977), p34. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1947: Reprinted 2004), p258. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Leni Riefenstahl, *The Blue Light*, (1932). [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Ralmon, “Béla Balázs in German Exile”, p17. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Ralmon, “Béla Balázs in German Exile”, pp17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, p49. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Ibid, p46. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, p39. See also Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, pp258-259, and Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism” in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, (New York: Vintage, 1981), pp73-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory: Visible Man and the Spirit of Film*, trans. by Erica Carter and Rodney Livingstone, (Oxford: Berghahn, 2010), p9. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. by Michael Hulse, (London: Penguin, 2009), p5. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Quoted in Woflgang Brückle, “Face-Off in Weimar Culture: The Physiognomic Paradigm, Competing Portrait Anthologies and August Sander’s *Face of Our Time*”, *Tate Papers*, Iss. 19, Spring 2013, p8 <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/19>, [accessed 28 May 2019]. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Alfred Döblin, “Faces, Images and their Truth”, in Sander, August, *Faces of Our Time*, (London: Schirmer Art Books,2003), p10. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Quoted in Brückle, “Face-Off in Weimar Culture”, p17. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Quoted in Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*, (Detroit MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p139. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. Sabine Hake, “Faces of Weimar Germany” in *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography*, edited by Dudley Andrew and Sally Shafto, (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Quoted in Leesa Rittelmann, “Facing Off: Photography, Physiognomy, and National Identity in the Modern German Photobook”, *Radical History Review*, Issue 106, 2010, p146. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume One: Women Floods Bodies History*, trans. by Stephen Conway, (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p409. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume One*, p438. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume Two: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, trans. by Erica Carter and others, (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota, 1989), p161. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Quoted in Theweleit, *Male Fantasies Volume Two*, p159. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. Rittelmann, “Facing Off”, p144. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1928), p101. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Spengler, *Decline of the West*, p100. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Gray, “About Face”, p158. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. Ibid, p178. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. For an exhaustive list of minor contemporary physiognomists, see Gray, “About Face”, p178. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Roger Griffin, “Tunnel Visions and Mysterious Trees: Modernist Projects of National and Racial Regeneration, 1880-1939” in *“Blood and Homeland”: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900-1940*, ed. by Marius Turda and Paul J. Weindling, (New York: CEU Press, 2007), p423. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Griffin, “Tunnel Visions”, p427. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Bálazs, *Early Film Theory*,p9. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Quoted in Gray, “About Face”, pp265-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Quoted in Gray, “About Face”, p267. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Spengler, *Decline of the West*, p102. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Ibid, p134. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. Ibid, p15. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Spengler, *Decline of the West*, p33. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Ibid, p21. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Bálazs, *Early Film Theory*, p39. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Quoted in Hake, “Faces of Weimar Germany”, pp123-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Döblin, “Faces, Images and their Truth”, p10. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. Ibid, pp8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Ibid, p10. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Ibid, p11. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Ibid, p13. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Ibid, p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Hake, “Faces of Weimar Germany”, p128. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. Döblin, “Faces, Images and their Truth”, p13. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Quoted in Hake, “Faces of Weimar Germany”, p124. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. Döblin, “Faces, Images and their Truth”, pp12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. August Sander, “From the Nature and Growth of Photography: Lecture 5: Photography as a Universal Language”, trans. by Anne Halley, *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 19 no. 4, 1978, p676. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Rittelmann, “Facing Off”, p143. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Quoted in Rittelmann, “Facing Off”, p138. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Quoted in Rittelmann, “Facing Off”, p138. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. See Rittelmann, “Facing Off”, p140. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. See Gray, “About Face”, p268. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Gray, “About Face”, pp268-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Hans F.K. Günther, *The Racial Elements of European History*, trans. by G.C. Wheeler, (London: Metheun, 1927), p1. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Günther, *Racial Elements*, p11. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Quoted in Gray, “About Face”, p265. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. As John W. Douard explains, Nelson Goodman makes a distinction between "graphic displays (diagrams, maps etc)" and "representations (drawings, sketches, photos)" in that the latter are relatively "replete", whilst the former are "attenuated." Goodman explains: "[s]ome features that are constitutive in the pictorial scheme are dismissed as contingent in the diagrammatic scheme; the symbols in the pictorial scheme are relatively *replete*." See John W. Douard, “E.-J. Marey’s Visual Rhetoric and the Graphic Decomposition of the Body”, *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science*, Volume 26, Issue 2 (1995), p188. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Robert Wiene, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, (Decla-Bioscop, 1920). [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Jean Epstein, “Maginification and Other Writings”, trans. Stuart Liebman, *October*, Vol. 3, (Spring 1977), p9. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, p4. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), p278. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, p41. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Ibid, p41. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Karsten Witte, “Visual Pleasure Inhibited: Aspects of the German Revue Film”, trans. by J.D. Steakley and Gabriele Hoover, *New German Critique*, 24-25 (1981-1982), pp238-263 (p261). [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn, (London: Pimlico, 1999), p23. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Indeed, it is no coincidence that “a range of mountains on the horizon” should be one of the images chosen by Benjamin to illustrate his classic formulation of the concept of “aura”; a mountain is in every respect the ideal symbol of auratic value. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Massumi, Brian, (London: Athlone Press, 1999, p183. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. George Orwell, *1984*, (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p49. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, pp42-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Ibid, p42. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. Leni Riefenstahl, *The Victory of Faith*, (Universum Film AG, 1933). [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*, (Universum Film AG, 1935). [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Claudia Schmölders, *Hitler’s Face: The Biography of an Image*, trans. by Adrian Daub, (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennysylvania Press, 2006), p41. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Quoted in Schmölders, *Hitler’s Face*, p152. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Schmölders, *Hitler’s Face*, p50. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. Quoted in Schmölders, *Hitler’s Face*, p131. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn, (London: Pimlico, 1999), p217. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. As well as the instance discussed below, close-ups of Hitler occur at a later point in his address to the Labour service, when Hitler proclaims that “The time will come when no German may enter the community of our people without having first worked as one of the people”, and during a speech to the Army, coinciding with the line “No, my comrades, we stand together for our Germany.” [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. Quoted in Schmölders, *Hitler’s Face*, pp108-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Quoted in Schmölders, *Hitler’s Face*, p185. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p279. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Veit Harlan, *Jud Süß*, (Terra Film, 1940). [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, p154. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. David S. Hull, *Film in the Third Reich: A Study of German Cinema 1933-1945*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p157. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. See Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, p7. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. Hull, *Film in the Third Reich*, p161. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. For Harlan’s accout of the production of *Jud Süß*, see Hull, *Film in the Third Reich*, pp164-168. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. Quoted in Hull, *Film in the Third Reich*, p170. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Quoted in Rentschler, p165. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. Hull, *Film in the Third Reich*, p170. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, p155. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. Günther, *Racial Elements*, p78. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. See Jennifer Hansen, The Art and Science of Reading Faces: Strategies of Racist Cinema in the Third Reich”, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 28 (2009), pp80-103 (p85); Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, p159; Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hilter*, p278. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Hansen, “Reading Faces”, p85. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History*, trans. Naomi Greene, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p140. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Quoted in Rentschler, *Ministry of Illusion*, pp158-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Fritz Hippler, *The Eternal Jew*, (Terra Film, 1940). [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Hansen, “Reading Faces”, p84. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. Ibid, p102. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, *October* 59 (1992), pp3-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p181. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York NY: Vintage, 1994), pxxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p386. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p384. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Béatrice Han-Pile, “The “Death of Man”: Foucault and Anti-Humanism”, in *Foucault and Philosophy*, edited by Timothy O’Leary and Christopher Falzon, (Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp118-138 (p122). [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p15. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p318. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
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