G. Enrie, *Shroud of Turin*, alleged ‹true› image af Christ, Royal Chapel, Turin Cathedral

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The Face is Where the Nose is

Editorial

«The face, the outermost border of the human body, has to be understood departing from the body. Both have in common that all their movements are gestures,» and: «We can detect among the world of things certain entities called faces. Yet they do not share the existence of things.» Both statements are from a compilation of Jean Paul Sartre's earlier essays known as *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Sartre, perhaps even involuntarily, pinpoints the double-faced nature of the face as a phenomenon that is virtually ubiquitous but hard to grasp. ‹The face› can be interpreted as a mere surface, an apparition in constant flux, but it is also intrinsically linked to the human body: Its core and substructure is the head, the skull, for which it serves as both a receptacle of impressions and a stage of expression. Yet the face appears to be neither a *thing*, nor an *object*, nor an *organ*. And although it is not an organ, the face can be (and has been) transplanted. It is exactly this initial set of complex ambivalences and a certain vagueness, which make the face such an intriguing study object.

This thematic issue of *kritische berichte* gathers analytical approaches to the ‹phenomenon face› from different disciplines: neurophysiology, philosophy of the body, cultural history, medicine, medieval history, and the history of art. In their contributions, the authors examine the face as medium and material, as mise-en-scene and matter, as mirror and membrane, producer and recipient – as a cultural construction and a human determinant. The essays are spurred by their authors' profound involvement in the question: WHAT IS A FACE? Along come other questions about what a face *meant* and *means*: culturally, socially, psychologically, physiologically, aesthetically, historically; what it might *look like* in the future; what we think it *represents*, but also what it means to lose one's face, have the wrong face, or live with someone else's face; and last but not least what the face tells about ‹us› – individually, culturally, and as a species.

The trick with faces is that they suggest connectivity. Faces look at us. They watch, smile and present themselves in private and public places – often enough for obvious seductive and commercial reasons. This makes sense because, physiologically speaking, the face possesses the most refined set to tools to structure and channel perception and transmit clues about the ways things are perceived and received.

Perception and imagination, the belief in images and image-making all overlap in the face. The face as a high-density system of physically operating sensory signals and their finely tuned choreography represents the person more than anything else. Often enough we think of a face *as* identity. And as such, faces occupy our minds.

The face is medial and representational, but it is also part of our material corporeality. It can be touched, kissed, colored, ‹made-up,› altered and erased. It is considered a rather stable factor of identity yet it also changes: with age, bodyweight, emotional state, daytime, social context. Its ontological status as an image in motion in recent year has been promoted by a remarkable boom of facial surgery and body alterations. We either want our face to stay as it is when we feel at our most potent and radiating, or we aspire to make it look as if we were in such a state of lasting and intriguing beauty. The millions of patients undergoing aesthetic surgery knowingly *incorporate* the traditionally *excorporated*: one's ideal portrait and the controlled preservation of similitude.

This is different with medically indicated interventions. When in 2005, for the first time in the history of mankind, French facial surgeon Bernard Devauchelle, transplanted the lower parts of a donor-face to a woman who had suffered extreme facial damage, the outcome of this surgery was much discussed. The transplantation of a dead person's face to a living yet practically ‹faceless› person was understood both as groundbreaking pioneer work *and* a highly irritating act. It raised an array of ethical questions about the nature and condition of our face in relation to our ‹self› – of the important feedback between surface and depth in human appearances and the exact degree of identification between an individual and his or her face.

Somewhat surprisingly, the discourses within the humanities about questions of the body often times neglect the face as a subcategory of the body – perhaps a result of Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's milestone publication *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (of 1980). Deleuze and Guattari define the face as primary childhood experience, a «strong organization» and a cultural code beyond organic factuality – a mixture of patterns of perception and psychological mechanisms of projection, and as a semiotic system of references. Interestingly, the human drive to ‹facialize› things that do not have a face in the strict sense is identified as a basically artistic operation, following the principles of figure-ground perception and the difference between line and picture plane. This approach has received much attention in media theory, for which it might have been intended in the first place. But it is of course an almost unduly reduction of complexities still worth pondering. What remains is the perhaps eternal question what a face actually is: an organ, a body part, a cultural construction, a media phenomenon, a highly codified (and perhaps over-interpreted) mechanism of signals – or merely the shop sign of our own identity-making?

If exhibition and publication titles are significant indicators, then the face seems to play a core role in recent approaches to art history and portraiture. In retrospect, research on portraiture in the 20th century is marked by the shift from an early interest in determining the sitter's identity towards questions of representation, social status and socio-political concepts of memory to their faces and bodies, their presence and agency as proxies and prompters of experience. Many exhibitions on portraiture of the past decade claim to be about ‹Faces.› Yet they are *not* about the face. They follow older and rather conventional ideas of portraiture and focus on faces – painted, drawn, sculpted, photographed, filmed – as manifestos of *concepts* of identity, gender and social status.

The booming ‹*economy*› of the face has not yet led to a comprehensive *history* of the face in western societies, let alone in a global perspective. It certainly requires more than a collection of essays to accomplish this Herculanean task, and the editors are well aware of it. One of the great challenges of writing a history of the face lies in its indisputable quest for transdisciplinarity (not to mention the breadth of historical knowledge it would take to write this book). It is exactly this challenge, or rather the *intellectual provocation* the face itself poses, that interests us the editors and authors in a profound sense.

Our small volume of *kritische berichte* is far from what it takes to write a history of the face. It does, however, embrace the necessity of integrating disciplines in the sciences *and* the humanities, while it is aware of the risk inherent to this challenge – the risk of incompleteness, of leaving more loose ends than we can tie up. That did not keep its contributors from believing that a start needs to be made and that its subject matter, the face, cannot be understood without thinking outside of the box and without gathering different viewpoints to stimulate intellectual exchange.

A face has many faces. Some of them are discussed here.