

## (Inter)faces, or how to think faces in the era of cyberfaces

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Across cultural history, the face has figured both as a site of intimate familiarity and radical unknowability.\* On the one hand, the face is the most immediate and recognizable marker of identity: an organic surface upon which interiority is projected and displayed. The pioneer of psychobiological theory Silvan Tomkins, for example, defines the face as the primary site of affects, making a significant equation between the face and the human being (1995, 263). On the other hand, the face emerges as a mask, a simulacrum, and an unsettling site of dissimulation, rejecting the causal link between external appearance and inner essence rooted primarily in the 18th-century physiognomic tradition. While the physiognomic discourse understands the face's exteriority in terms of a semiotic surface that faithfully reflects the mental or cognitive state of the human subject, recent scholarship has brought about not only a critical reassessment of such determinism, uncovering its devastating historical consequences, as tellingly suggested by the title of Richard Gray's work *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz* (2004), but also radically different conceptions of the "cyberfaces" now inhabiting internet landscapes, undermining ideas of facial resemblance and likeness (Belting 2017).

The recent exhibition "Gesicht" at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden (2017), curated by literary scholar Sigrid Weigel, illuminated these multiple and ambivalent approaches to the face, foregrounding the eminent importance of further research into the face amid current sociopolitical and technological shifts. Exploring the affective and technological dimensions of the face from the point of view of both cultural history and contemporary neuroscience, the exhibition attested to the face's call for interdisciplinary exploration. From the ubiquity of Facebook and Instagram, to the politics of identity, to innovations in plastic surgery, to the "uncanny valley" inhabited by robots' faces, the face continues to constitute a site of contestation, resistance, transformation, and plurality which demands to be thought in greater diversity. How do literature, the visual arts, and cinema invent and explore the manifold aesthetic, political, and socio-cultural dimensions of the face? How does the face fit specifically within discourses of embodiment? How do faces catalyze new modes

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of aesthetics, society, and sociality in the contemporary moment as well as across technological and posthuman futures? Framed by these questions and situated in both the recent debates around the face in humanities and its contemporary uses in various aesthetic forms and cultural practices, the premise of this issue of *World Literature Studies* is to think the face beyond the boundaries of the classical subject and its interiority.

So, let us begin with one of the major contestations, embedded in the key notion of this issue: “(Inter)faces”. In his recent transdisciplinary account of the cultural history and anthropology of the face that serves as a recurrent reference across our essays, *Face and Mask: A Double History* (2017), Hans Belting announces a new era of digital faces which rejects any traditional claim of “true” resemblance and likeness of a real human being, marking a shift to a condition in which the relation between the face and the subject is more than ever before grounded in a radical disembodiment: “We find ourselves in an unprecedented situation: new digital technology has dissolved the connection of the image to the face that it seeks to document and placed the pictures completely at our disposal” (2017, 166). Instead of the real, tangible, and verifiable human faces we become at once surrounded by and a part of a “digital masquerade” crowded with artificially generated or biotechnically morphed *cyberfaces* that “are not faces but rather digital masks with which the production of faces has reached a turning point in the modern media” (239, 241). Belting’s cultural diagnosis could not be more precise. The current flood of digital facial images, be they of CGI (computer-generated image) origin, enhanced, morphed, photoshopped or else modified – which is more often than not a common practice of social media users posting their selfies on Facebook, Instagram, or Tinder (and thus creating a new sort of non-identity pictures that we might call a “post-portrait”) – or a result of the cutting edge, and over the last decade much debated, technologies of the FRC (Facial Recognition System), indicates that there is, indeed, a problem of a facial dissolution when the face as a guarantee of a recognizable identity simply disappears.

Without any doubt, this situation when myriads of faces are no longer physically approached, viewed face to face, overtly or secretly scrutinized during the real-time encounters, or, eventually, fantasized upon watching their features imprinted into the analogue photography or film, but are rather evaluated, selected, and venerated via cultural practices of swiping, liking, hashtagging, and filtering, can easily provoke confusion. At best, the virtual facial torrent leads to a skepticism over the faces’ anthropologic value; at worst, the world of synthetic faces could entice a “facephobia” of a kind: a critical attitude that would articulate this state of “digital masquerade” as a mere loss of identity, body, and, even worse, humanity. Without being pessimistic, something of a suspicious tone against the artificial facial universe appears in Belting’s work, especially when he explains that the aforementioned *cyberfaces* “no longer represent *faces*, but only *interfaces* among an infinite number of potential images, whose closed loop separates them from the outside without the interposition of any physical bodies” (240). Rather than pursuing such a dystopian trajectory, this special issue proposes a somewhat less somber perspective whereby the face functions as a media and aesthetic interface.

Certainly, this (inter)face leaves an alleged stability of postromantic and modernist subject behind, but this shift from subjectivity, interiority, and identity has an important conceptual payoff that allows the face to be explored *relationally* – as a constitutive part of a dynamic network and within various modalities of its linking, connecting, overlapping, and interlacing. In other words, once we venture to dismantle the faces’ metaphysical baggage – and thus to turn down the traditional and hackneyed metaphor of the face (specifically the eyes) as a window to the soul – the face becomes a specific yet non-exclusive cultural *object*, one whose semantic, aesthetic, and conceptual forces are coextensive with the role and position it maintains within operative chains with other cultural objects. When Sigrid Weigel aptly suggests that “the history of the face is first and foremost a history of media” (2012, 6 [Belting 2017, 4]), it seems useful to add that the mediality of the face exceeds by far an intentional expression, the subject’s self-representation, and interpersonal communication and is, in fact, on the way to becoming a medium in its own right. One that instead of serving as a mere tool for the transmission of meaning and representation, works as a conduit that helps us “*activate* our senses, our reflexivity, and our practices” (Casetti 2015, 5). The first premise of this issue is therefore to think the face as a cultural object in its various mediations, aesthetic constellations, cultural uses, and theoretical conceptualizations beyond the confines of the traditional subject.

Another reason why we deem useful to shed positive light on this shift from a face as a guarantee of the subject’s identity and expression to the face as one among many other cultural objects is to prevent a nostalgic label of the “post-face” era which would repeat the same rhetoric of mourning which was recently described by Vinzenz Hediger and Miriam de Rosa in relation to the discourse of post-mediality (2016). Rather than indulging in an elegiac tone, let us try to connect the face to existent cultural circuits and then we can figure out whether or not there is any actual loss to be lamented.

The present effort to think the face as a cultural and media interface has its important recent precedents that deserve to be acknowledged here. The majority of them appear in this issue’s essays, such as the groundbreaking collected volume edited by Joanna Woodall (1997), Ernst van Alphen’s work on the contemporary visual portrait (2005), Noa Steimatsky’s *Face on Film* (2017), and Jean Luc Nancy’s two seminal works *Le Regard du Portrait* (2000) and *L’Autre portrait* (2014). Others are present implicitly as important conceptual interlocutors, such as the compelling book *Inventing Faces* edited by Mona Körte et al. (2013), Sigrid Weigel’s *Gesichter* (2013) but also the special issues of the journals *Kunstforum* “Gesicht im Porträt, Porträt ohne Gesicht” (2012), edited by Judith Elisabeth Weiss, and *Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaft*, entitled “En Face: Seven Essays on the Human Face” (2012). While the key question the editors of the latter volume, Jeanette Kohl and Dominic Olariu, asked was “What is a face?” in order to examine what “a face *meant* and *means*: culturally, socially, psychologically, physiologically, aesthetically, historically” (3), the present analytical inquiries attempt to probe what the faces – always plural, always different from each other – *do*, how they *operate* within media and theoretical con-

stellations and what kind of linking modalities they offer. Exploring these operations and modalities from the intermedia and transdisciplinary point of view is a main goal of this journal issue entitled *(Inter)faces* whose contributions can be divided into three trajectories, following distinct, yet interrelated facial objects: (1) hyperfaces, (2) plastic faces, and (3) portraits.

The opening essay of this issue could be read as a conceptual unfolding of Belting's notion of cyberfaces that lays productive ground for future research into the digital configurations of facial images across the internet. Both political and aesthetic avenues are carefully explored by Pietro Conte's article "Mockumentality: From hyperfaces to deepfakes" whose emphasis on the cultural history of *prosopon* shows how the principle of "deepfake" was an always already underlying element of representation and performativity of the human face. According to Conte, hyperrealistic replicas of the human face owe their documentary value to the belief that they result from mechanical reproduction, which functions as a guarantee of their truthfulness and reliability as well as an aura of authenticity. But what happens when the link between hyperrealism, mechanicalness, and truthfulness is disentangled? Drawing on the case study of a 2017 art-political event, when French artist Raphaël Fabre successfully applied for an ID card using a computer-generated picture where the real face was, in fact, an artificial, synthetic mask, his essay tackles the issue of the increasing overlapping of actual reality and digital (un)reality, particularly focusing on the concerns raised by the confusion between faces and masks caused by the rapid spread of so-called deepfakes in a world that speeds from documentality toward what Conte proposes to call *mockumentality*.

### INDEXICALITY IN CRISIS: THE FACE AS A FORMAL PROBLEM AND A DISPOSITIF

Once we decide to approach the face as a medium, an analogous problem arises, observed originally by film scholars in relation to the post-media condition: the problem of indexicality and its dissipation. For the face, which is always mediated, conditioned, and constituted by a given situation and spatiotemporal coordinates, figures as a surface of different indexes relating to both the individual and collective bodies. To be sure, this indexicality has been substantially shattered by the historical experience of disfiguration during the two 20th century world wars. As succinctly noted by Suzannah Biernoff: "Both portraiture and physiognomy rely on the premise that the face is a reliable index of gender, age, social and familial identity, ethnicity, emotion, and much more besides. However, beneath the face we are meat [...]" (2017, 12–13). The same holds true for the modernist aesthetic experience: from a mere glance at the visual works of Alberto Giacometti, Wols, Arnulf Rainer, Francis Bacon, or Cindy Sherman, it becomes apparent that the traditional view of the face as an indexical surface of subjectivity and self-expression becomes substantially undermined. Both experiences then, once again, seem to confirm Belting's observation that "there is no stable relationship between the face and the self and no reliable likeness. In fact, we are always practicing self-expression anew with our gaze, voice, and expressive gestures" (2017, 27).

However, there are at least two ways to turn this crisis of indexicality into a productive reversal and think the face as both a media dispositif and a formal problem. The former position is taken up by the recent work of Noa Steimatsky whose 2017 book endeavours “to think *through* the facial image, which means that it does not posit its object at arm’s length but assimilates it as a *dispositif*” (3), i.e. as “a flexible configuration of attitudes, relations, and discourses, comprising the very consciousness of the medium, that guide and frame critical attitude” (3). Building upon Steimatsky’s proposition that the face can work as “both a compelling iconographic and discursive nexus and a way of seeing, a critical lens, a mode of thought” (3), the second premise of this issue posits the face as a *theoretical figure*. The latter possibility is to conceive of the face as a formal problem, a cultural object that generates aesthetic formations and transformations. In this vein, Jean-Luc Nancy announces the face in visual portraits as “a moveable play of reflections and angles, an essential instability that is always effacing or transforming itself” (2018, 99). To analyze the face in its functional connections and networks, one needs to bypass the perpetual vocabulary of the individualizing and expressive side of the face and to undertake its formal close reading.

Both approaches inform the second part of this issue which is structured around the filmic face. While Abraham’s Geil’s essay explores the question of (inter)faces as a problem of mimetic form in the work of Sergei Eisenstein, Bernhard Siegert’s article delves into the media archeology of Expressionist cinema. In his article “Plasmatic mimesis: Notes on Eisenstein’s (inter)faces,” Geil suggests that while Eisenstein’s early theory of attractions emphasizes the production of audience effects through “motor imitation”, his later writings appear to depart from this model for sake of a notion of “ex-stasis” that would transport the spectator out of her or his current state. These two sides of Eisenstein’s thought are then brought together in the concept of “plasmatic mimesis”, which Geil explores through the figure of the face in several of Eisenstein’s theoretical texts and his first film *Strike* (1925). By taking up the device most associated with the face in Eisenstein – typage – and reading a specific instance in *Strike*’s superimposition of animal and human faces, the aim of Geil’s essay is to decenter the face as a privileged site for mimesis-as-mirroring in cinema and audio-visual media. Thinking the face through the concept of “plasmatic mimesis” makes it into one form among others but in doing so it frees the face to assume the principle Eisenstein calls “formal ecstasy”: the capacity of all form not simply to mimic but to ex-statically stand beside and beyond itself.

If Geil aims to decenter the face as a privileged site for mimetic representation in cinema, then Bernhard Siegert (re)turns to the face as a site of ecstatic, scientific spectacle in film. He also turns not only to these representations of the face, similarly to Geil and Jirsa, but also to the real, corporeal, tangible faces of corpses in scientific experiments. Following the trajectory of the face beyond an individual expression, Siegert’s essay “Post mortem performances: On Duchenne de Boulogne, or physiognomy in the age of technical media” reconstructs the genealogy of the electro-physiognomic experiments, which Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne conducted in the second half of the 19th century, and highlights their impact on the media dispositif of the

early 20th century. The photographs in Duchenne's *Mécanisme de la physionomie humaine* (1862) are discussed as part of an epistemological shift from the semiotic regime of expression to the media regime of switching by which they are indissolubly connected to the history of galvanism and electromagnetism on the one hand, and to the history of hypnotism and Expressionist film on the other. Due to this perspective, a main focus lies in an archaeology of Duchenne's special feature of the gliding cardboards that introduces the on/off operation of switching into both photography and "the body", and its echo in expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1919–1920) or *Frankenstein* (1931).

The face in cinematic media and visual culture thus offers potent analysis, allowing Geil and Siegert to explore the face as a site to be manipulated mechanically and scientifically not only through film editing but also by means of electrical experiments. The face bends, gurneys, and contorts, becoming unnerving and shocking for the viewer. The face becomes bestial, monstrous, and a surface upon which the potential violences of human nature are expressed and represented. The gothic, ghostly films Siegert analyses in expressionist cinema and the factory strike bloodshed Geil studies in Eisenstein's *Strike* are to be viewed with more attention to the face and how it becomes a cipher for much more than the simple assumption that it represents an individual's interiority. In the following section, three contributors explore the assumptions about the face, and what it stands for, in portraiture, taking to task the fields of music videos, literature, and visual art.

## RECONFIGURING THE PORTRAIT

Even a fleeting glance at the historical, aesthetic, social, philosophical, and political groundings of the face suffices to acknowledge that it is nearly impossible to arrange all these dimensions into well-ordered categories. Jean-Claude Schmitt's contribution to the general history of the face is useful wherein he proposes a threefold differentiation of the face: 1) as a sign of identity, 2) as a vehicle of expression, 3) as a site of representation (2012, 7). These functions, however, are essentially short-circuited not only in the aesthetic strategies of contemporary art but also in many other cultural practices. However, in his argument for intercultural perspectives and a historical anthropology of the face, Schmitt proposes an intriguing semiotics of the face based on its etymology, which is rooted in the German word *Gesicht* and the French word *visage* (coming from the Latin word *visum* denoting both seeing and being seen), and which links the seen object to the very act of seeing, while referring to the face as "something that we see in front of us and that in turn looks back at us" (7).

Both the seen object and the object that sees creates the third axe of this issue which is framed by the theoretical and analytical inquiries into the portrait. In his essay "Faces without interiority: Music video's reinvention of the portrait", Tomáš Jirsa suggests that no matter how contemporary music videos differ across genres, aesthetic styles, and production background, they usually focus on the performer's face. Exploring its opacity and agency, Jirsa argues that contemporary music video production replaces the face as an expression of the subject's interiority and identity with a media-affective interface whose main function is to amplify the video's work



of audiovisual forms, performative mechanisms, and atmosphere. Through a close reading of the hip-hop video *Chum* by Earl Sweatshirt (dir. Hiro Murai, 2012), his essay demonstrates how it generates the face as an audiovisual screen that absorbs, intensifies, and gives rhythm to both the moving images and sounds. Such desubjectification opens a way to rethink portraiture within the music video genre as a media operation undermining the traditional notions of representation, interiority, and identity in favor of unfolding its technological and affective links between sounds, moving images, and lyrics.

While Jirsa explores the portrait in the contemporary audiovisual medium of the music video, Mieke Bal returns to the iconic figure of Cervantes' Don Quijote. He has been studied across different fields of scholarship and remains not only a hauntological, iconic figure in Hispanic patrimony but also a key part of Western modern speech. The quixotic Quijote is a reason to return to the face of this unknowable, mysterious figure. Bal's essay "Facing the face: To be or not to be Don Quijote" presents a "preposterous" updating of *Don Quijote*, in the face of trauma, contemporary slavery, and the importance of a social face-to-face, or interface, to help people to come out of their isolation inflicted on them by violence. Her argument begins with the "updating" of a literary monument, an instance of cultural heritage that never lost its relevance for whatever era in which it functions. The focus on trauma makes this particularly necessary, since those on whom the stagnation and isolation violence causes has been inflicted, must be helped socially. Bal's essay is structured around her own video installation *Don Quijote: Sad Countenances* where some characters discuss the value and possibility of history, the authorship of Cervantes' novel, and the importance of the literary imagination, while the figure of Don Quijote, in front of a large mirror, exposes himself to an artist-photographer who tries to capture his face.

Bal's literary analysis and video project that aim to capture Quijote's literary, extra-textual, and mythic face, or at least to nuance the impossibilities of this endeavour, are efforts sustained by Timea Andrea Lelik in her essay analyzing the distorting and dissipating faces of Francis Bacon's portraits. In her article entitled "Blurred boundaries: Francis Bacon's portraits", Lelik explores Bacon's portraiture and his resistance to the mimetic, identity portraiture so common in classical art history. Through his large oil paintings, often exhibited behind panes of impenetrable yet reflective glass, Lelik analyses Bacon's implicit critiques of portraiture and the potential for the viewers' portraits to be reflected back into the paintings. She argues that Bacon, with his facially and bodily distorted portraits, is hinting at the fact that portraiture sacrifices the subject for the sake of representation. She also posits that Bacon was claiming that portraiture as a genre needs to re-determine the conditions that originally shaped it. In her analysis of the way in which Bacon depicts his subjects, particularly their faces, Lelik further argues that his portraits blur the boundaries between object and subject, portrait and viewer, in order to remodel conventional notions of portraiture. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's theory on Francis Bacon, she reinterprets Bacon's works through the prism of Buddhist philosophy, arguing that understanding the works through Buddhist practices opens the possibility of a com-

plete transformation of pre-existing concepts which traditionally shaped portrait making. Her study, while focused on a relatively static visual art genre, suggests that there is a dynamism and movement being evoked in Bacon's paintings, thus linking her to the other contributors who have explored different kinds of media such as film, music videos, scientific experiments, and video projects.

These varied and interdisciplinary studies that span topics from different eras, countries, and languages aim to critique the primacy of the face in terms of representing identity while delving into the performative and aesthetic modalities, generated and sustained by the face. They also probe the supposed primordality of the face in various media and bring our attention to the ways in which this dominance has been nuanced, questioned, and even subverted. This journal issue thus adds to growing scholarship and popular cultural awareness of the fallibility of the face as a vector for identity and notions of truth, honesty, and sincerity. As we stated at the beginning, we are living in the age of cyberfaces and deepfakes when traditional, conventional assumptions about the face and the identitary claims it makes, are being – rightly – scrutinized. We should thus actively question our ideological assumptions about the face as something familiar and knowable, and instead, learn to attentively watch, observe, touch, and connect it to cultural interfaces. There is no longer one conception of the face and its function; instead, we are in the age of interfaces and cyberfaces, so we must learn to criticize and confront the (inter)faces that face us.

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