Kronfeldner, M.; Einsele, L; Bürkler, O.; Haag, A.; Loidolt, S.; Park, J.:

Face Matters: Why Do We Care So Much About Faces?

In an interdisciplinary meeting that we call *Digital Salon*, we aimed to address the question of *why faces matter so much*. We met online on June 2, 2020 and approached the issue from different academic, technological and artistic perspectives. The aim was to integrate these different perspectives in an open dialogue with an international group of experts in order to raise awareness about the importance of faces at a time when we are hiding them more than ever, be it in "facing" other human beings or in "facing" digital technology.

Participants

Maria Kronfeldner (editor, moderator, philosophy)
Lukas Einsele (co-editor, photography)
Oliver Bürkler (laser scanner engineering)
Albrecht Haag (photography)
Sophie Loidolt (social philosophy)
Julie Park (history)

Documentation

Charles Hawley (copy editing)
Verena Schneider (mind mapping)
Stephanie Stadler (social media)

This text is part of the project *Hiding Faces*, a philosophical-artistic collaboration between Lukas Einsele and Maria Kronfeldner, which is hosted as part of Kronfeldner's *Epistemology of the In/Human* Project and as part of the activities of the *Verein Kultur einer Digitalstadt e.V.* ***It will be published as part of the Swiss Art Magazine 957, together with other results of the project.***

Introduction

Maria Kronfeldner (MK): Our topic for this Digital Salon is “why faces matter,” or more precisely, why faces matter *for us*. That means the question has an index, i.e. it centers on human beings, on *us,* even though the technology around faces, the digital technology, will inevitably play a role in our discussion. So, too, will the fact that we are currently living through a pandemic, a time in which we are hiding our faces not only from facial recognition technologies, but also from each other. We are, in fact, hiding our faces more than ever.

I hope that we can not only discuss *that* faces matter and *in which senses* they matter, but also that we can develop a critical perspective towards the issue. I, for instance, don't actually know *why* I believe that faces matter so much.

Let me introduce myself briefly. I work in the philosophy of science, in particular the philosophy of the life and social sciences. As such, I know quite a bit about evolutionary thinking and related areas. Naturally, when I read the literature on faces, I first looked at what evolutionary thinking might have to offer. I haven’t dug deep into it, but it seems to be clear that faces evolved because of movement and distance. Plants don’t have faces; most animals do. The evolutionary occurrence of faces is something one could summarize as: “front towards the other,” with “front” meaning “face,” because, interestingly, faces developed in those animals for whom movement *in one direction* was necessary or adequate. Animals have locomotion, and most have bodies that are directed, i.e. these animals need to turn their entire body if they want to move in another direction efficiently. For instance, when we run, we run in one direction, and if we want to turn, we have to turn our entire body. The face is at the front of the movement and it can scan what is ahead, even things that are at a certain distance. In other words, we are created in special ways (in directed and mobile ways, so to speak), and faces are there (and at the front) for that reason.

Second, the face is often directed at another human being, with whom it communicates. When psychologists began testing why faces matter, they performed an experiment that I found instructive: it is called the Still Face Experiment. It involves a child between one and three years old and a caregiver. They first interact normally, face-to-face, before the caregiver is then asked to turn away from the child, and then to hold her or his face still when turning back to the child again. You can see in videos of the experiment how upset the children get. Initially, they do all they can to get the caregiver to show facial expression again. It seems that the face really matters in our social interactions and does so already for these young children.

With this as a background, I’d like to take a moment to allow everyone to introduce themselves. Then, in Part I, we will address some questions that I have prepared for each of you. This will be the first round of our discussion. After a short break, we will then have a more interactive discussion in Part II. Oliver, could you please start by briefly introducing yourself and tell us about your background?

Oliver Bürkler (OB): Thanks Maria and hello everybody. My name is Oliver Bürkler and I'm located in Ludwigsburg, near Stuttgart. I am a product manager at FARO, responsible for the laser scanner portfolio. Lukas is currently using one of the products from our portfolio for some of his scans. As an engineer, my focus is on the technical side of things. I'm very curious how this discussion will go, and I'm interested in art. I'm very happy that I work for a company that supports projects like this one. We are supporting a number of different projects, though Lukas' project is the only one in Germany. There will be another one in July in Berlin, where we will be supporting a film crew from the film academy. We are interested in such projects and thus happy to support them. We'll see how much I can contribute today, but either way, I'm extremely interested and excited to join you here.

MK: Thank you, Oliver. Welcome! Lukas Einsele is next. Lukas, could you please introduce yourself briefly?

Lukas Einsele (LE): I'm Maria's collaborator in the "Hiding Faces" project. My approach to this topic is as a visual artist and photographer, in contrast to Maria's mainly philosophical perspective. First of all, though, I want to disagree with, or add something to, what Oliver said. When I first met Oliver in connection with an application for using the laser scanner, we ended up in an extended discussion of more than an hour about what reality is. What do we see? How do we see? How do we look at each other? We ended up in the middle of the topic we are discussing today. Oliver, I think you have a lot to contribute!

Back to me, though: I've been working on understanding the face since I started photography at age 14, and I'm still looking for something today. Actually, in recent years I've discovered that when you make a portrait of a face, there is more missing than is actually present. This is the point which interests me most, not exactly *what* is missing but how it might be possible to show the lack of information coming from a face – rather than showing a sort of continuity or completeness, which the face seems to represent. That is the question that led to my interaction with Maria and which has made it fruitful. Ultimately, what I hope to get from today's discussion are answers, or at least questions, from other points of view that help me develop that approach.

MK: Sophie, please, it is your turn.

Sophie Loidolt (SL): I have done extensive work in what is called phenomenology, which has a lot to do with how things appear. And the question at hand, of course, is how does a face appear? One philosopher who is very well-known for discussing faces as a philosophical topic is Emmanuel Levinas. I've been working on him quite a lot, and also on political philosophy, mainly Hannah Arendt.

MK: Thank you Sophie. Julie, you are next to introduce yourself, please.

Julie Park (JP): I'm Julie Park and I am a scholar of visual and material culture in 18th-century England. I started out as an English literature professor and am now a rare books curator. This turn in my career reflects my devotion to the study of material objects. It's through being a curator and working in libraries that I'm able to work in a more interdisciplinary manner and have the opportunity to interact constantly with cultural heritage objects. As such, I'm quite excited to be part of this interdisciplinary gathering.

I'm also the author of the book "The Self and It." Maria came to me on the basis of this work and asked me to collaborate with her on her project on dehumanization. I can talk more about that book and how the particular argument I was making is related to faces and why faces mattered in 18th-century England. That said, I am also very interested in talking about why faces matter in a trans-historical and a trans-disciplinary conversation.

MK: Thank you, Julie, and welcome! Albrecht, since you joined late: We're starting with everyone introducing themselves. I hope you've already heard part of it. Maybe you can add a few words about yourself, please.

Albrecht Haag (AH): I'm Albrecht. In real life, I am a photographer and for the last 15 years, I have organized a photography festival right here in Darmstadt, the Darmstadt Photography Days, which is hosted by the Kunstforum belonging to the Technical University of Darmstadt. My main activities now involve organizing exhibitions as a project manager and curator. Together with Lukas, I'm one of the founders of "Kultur einer Digitalstadt," a project we've been working on for the last two years. These are my main projects at the moment, and I'm also working as project manager at the Kunstforum belonging to the Technical University of Darmstadt.

MK: Sorry, there was some audio missing, but at least your face was moving and I think we got the essence – proof that the face matters. Thank you! I also want to give Verena and Stephanie an opportunity to introduce themselves. They are kind enough to stay in the background for reporting purposes, and, as we all know, backgrounds are very important. Could you please come to the foreground for a moment to introduce yourselves?

Stephanie Stadler (SSt): My name is Stephanie. I'm an art historian with a special interest in contemporary art, photography and, most of all, Nordic photography. Currently, I'm working as a project assistant together with Albrecht at the Darmstadt Photography Days. I'm also the social media manager at Kehrer Verlag in Heidelberg. For "Kultur einer Digitalstadt," I'm currently responsible for public relations, content marketing and social media. I've been following Hiding Faces and presenting it to the public via the Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts belonging to "Kultur einer Digitalstadt."

Verena Schneider (VS): My name is Verena and I'm also here today as a project assistant with "Kultur einer Digitalstadt." I'm a communication designer and I work in design and illustration. Today, I will be recording your discussion with my concept map. I will try to include some of the results we are discussing and some of your ideas, hopefully understanding you all correctly. If not, just let me know by writing in the chat. I'm very excited about what we will be discussing over the next two hours.

MK: Thank you very much. Thanks to everyone. We have about one hour now for the first part of our discussion: Questions and Answers.

Part I: Questions and Answers on How and Why Faces Matter

MK: Sophie, you mentioned that you're working on Levinas and other philosophers, like Hannah Arendt. Levinas is well-known for stressing that a face is very important in our social interactions – that is, in our understanding of each other as social beings. Can you explain briefly why that is the case?

SL: I think the most striking thing about Levinas is that, with respect to the face, there's actually something that withdraws. The face is not about a visual presence (as we might assume) but an ethical relationship. There's an interview in which Levinas says: "I do not know if one can speak of a 'phenomenology' of the face since phenomenology describes what appears." ("Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo", p. 85). In other words, the face is not about the fact that you know that eyes look like this, and noses and mouths and so on. He says, and I'm quoting from memory: if you notice the other's eye color if you are in contact with them, then you're actually not in a social relation with them. What does he mean by that? I think he means that if we happen to objectify a look on the face, we sort of make it a "still face," if you will. We suddenly have a theoretical approach to it and we objectify it. For Levinas, this is exactly what the face is *not*. It's nice that you, Maria, mentioned movement, because Levinas says the face *speaks*. The face is actually not like a picture, it could never stand still. Instead, the face engages us. The Still Face Experiment is such a nice case in point here: Why does the toddler get so distressed? It's not because the face disappears, it's because the face stops the interaction. I think that is what is important for Levinas, that there is this interactive process. He calls that the mode of speech and not the mode of vision – that we're not objectifyingly looking at an object, but we are engaged with it.

There is one further thought that makes this ethically relevant for him, if I may. There is a certain ambivalence in the above described interaction: He says that the other speaks from a height, and at the same time, the other is poor, naked and destitute. So, the face somehow speaks in an ambivalence of "height" and "poverty," as it is usually translated. He also says some quite unsettling things: The face of the other invites me to violence. It invites me, in its nakedness, to violate it. On the other hand, the face says: "You ought not kill me." As such, he brings in one of the most important of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not murder." That is what the face expresses for him. But how can you interpret that? Doing so is quite difficult. Some have said it's actually sort of the contact itself, the interaction with others, that instills something like the normative dimension in us.

It's not that the face *causes* me not to kill the other, because Levinas says himself that murder is a trivial possibility, even if we look into each other's faces. But what happens is the resistance of non-resistance, he says in a paradoxical vein. This brings me to the normative dimension: "Thou shalt not kill." The face is an imperative, which is why he says that it "speaks from a height." And at the same time, it is the one that I can hurt. This ambivalence is quite interesting.

I think the most important thing to understand is that the face is not just eyes and noses and mouths; the face is whenever we are engaged in a way that is not an objectifying look. And that, I think, is the interaction element that also connects nicely to experiences or experiments like the Still Face.

MK: I have another question for you, before a third one about phenomenology, which will establish a bridge to Lukas and Albrecht.

If it’s not the eyes, nose, mouth, etc. that makes the face, what gives it a normative force? Why is it the face? Why is it not my hands that "speak”? Is it the eyes? That would have been my understanding, but that’s not his point, right? If you're looking at the eyes, you’re actually already objectifying. Can you help us understand how it is not the eyes – that direct look into the other’s face – that makes the face matter so much for us?

SL: I think it's more the movement of somebody being alive. It's more that there is another consciousness over there. His philosophy, if you will, is not directly about faces, but in the face. That is important for Levinas, it’s where his voice comes through. The commandment and imperative of the interaction in speech is why you know and care about the face, not the other way around. It’s not so much the look of it. He says that quite explicitly (again quoted from memory): "I want to move away from that Western primacy of the look.”

There is also an additional reason. Jean Paul Sartre, for example, was somebody who heavily emphasized the look of the other. That places the face in the objectifying framework of the look – and it connects to the shame I feel when I’m looked at. So, here, the look is very important. I think Levinas wants to walk that back a little bit and put us in a relationship where we don’t look so much but listen instead.

Maybe he gives us the possibility to understand the face in many dimensions? It’s not only a visual phenomenon, but one that has a metaphorical aspect as well. A face is something which engages me in a conversation during which I must respond. The order is reversed. It’s not like there is first a face, and then it causes something, but when I am engaged, then there is a face – even if it’s hidden or even if it’s withdrawn. Perhaps it is more the voice that engages me.

MK: Thank you. The last question I have is a follow-up: Where does phenomenology come in? What is the phenomenology of the face, if I may call it that?

SL: An interviewer once asked Levinas exactly this question, and the first thing he said was (again quoted from memory): “I don't know if one can speak of the phenomenology of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears.” This connects nicely to what Lukas says, because Levinas, as much as he calls himself a phenomenologist, is interested in what does not appear and what withdraws while you’re in the appearance.

That is a bit of a Heideggerian thought, I would say: It’s not that everything is just plainly there, but as you are looking into the face, you realize that there is consistently something that does not initially show itself. That also goes back to Husserl, who says (quoted from memory): “I encounter the alter ego, but it does not ‘originally’ appear like my own stream of consciousness. If it did, you would be a part of me.” There is something which always withdraws. This means that you can surprise me, for example. It means that there's always something new, because there's always something hidden.

Levinas calls this the "trace," that there's something in the appearance, but the appearance itself says that it's not all there. You could say that it's a phenomenology of withdrawal – something that appears as a promise of more, but you never get there. That is why Levinas says that one has a desire for the other. It's a desire that can never be relinquished or that can never be fulfilled because there's always this withdrawal of alterity.

MK: Thank you. That's a good bridge to Albrecht and Lukas because, Lukas, you mentioned something similar with respect to the experience of the photographer, and both of you work with the camera. How do you experience that dialectic between the desire to know more, that desire for completeness, on the one hand, and the fact that we can never achieve it, on the other? Why does the photographer even have a desire for completeness? And how does that play out in your own artistic experience? Maybe you could start Albrecht, since Lukas already said something about that at the beginning?

AH: I have two different approaches to the face. The first is a professional one: I used to do a lot of portrait photography for companies, and every second businessman would ask me to hide the fat or the pimples and so on. Then, after looking at the face through the camera, I would sit at my computer at home for another hour looking at all the pimples and retouching them. I got sick of it, and I'm happy that I don't have to do that for the rest of my life. Yet, the tools we have available as photographers are perfect. Maybe I can demonstrate later just how easy it is to transform a face. My promise to my customers was always: "I will make changes to your face and you will still be the same person, but I will only get rid of the things which will disappear by next week anyway." For example, if the red pimple on your nose is only there for the day of the photo shoot and would be gone by next week, I can get rid of it today. It's crazy how this software works, and it's strange how I was lured by it to optimize people's appearance more and more. It's a little bit disorienting, and sometimes I had to stop myself from *not* making a face too perfect. So, that's one aspect.

The other aspect can be illustrated by a photo project where I used my own face to explore things further. To find a deeper connection with my subjects, I retouched myself into two "historical" pictures.

In the 2000s in Germany, there was a neo-Nazi terrorist organization that killed several people with migrant backgrounds. They were called the National Socialist Underground, or NSU. When they were caught, the police published the faces of the three terrorists.

The first victim was Enver Şimşek. He was killed in 2000. Two pictures – the one of Şimşek and one of the murderers – have been retouched by me using my own face. I used these photos in an exhibition about the "Dönermorde" (Döner murders), as the killings perpetrated by the NSU were called and which was also the title of the exhibition.

I tried to feel like the people felt: I retouched my face into these photos to feel like the person who was murdered and like the person who had committed murder. These photos made it into the media because my retouched photos from the exhibition were those with the highest resolution to be found via Google. Several agencies picked them up from Google and used them for television broadcasts and print media. My face circled the globe as a murderer and as a murder victim.

It was strange, and it was really difficult to get my face back out again, to get it off the web. I hadn't spoken to the family of Enver Şimşek, and the NSU trial was just getting started. I didn't want to be on the web with my face connected to it, but it was there, and I had to upload a lower resolution file so that Google would put the original pictures back on the first page.

MK: Maybe one should be careful when putting faces online. What you said, though, also says something about how the person and the face connects. It is now your personality that is connected with the story, quite a violent story at that, through a face. And at the same time, you say that, regarding the first aspect you discussed, when people want a portrait, they want it to be touched up. Did the people like having their face “fixed”? Or was it somehow uncanny, especially if the touching up wasn't just for little blemishes but for more. Where is the line? At what point do they start to feel that they force you to cheat about them as a person? Is there something about the idea of faces being windows into the human soul that has changed in the last, say, 10 to 15 years? It seems to me that people are now more complacent when it comes to altering faces. Maybe the face matters less and less today, when compared to earlier times, when the technology of retouching was less powerful and less widespread. In that case, the face would indeed tell us less about personality. That is, if you can change the face without changing who I am, then the face doesn’t seem to be quite as important anymore to who I am. If it were important, the face and the person should change together.

AH: We can say something about their personality if they ask, for instance, whether I can remove a few kilos from their face. But the photo is used like a wall: You will be present on your company's website for a long time, and if you have a bright red pimple that whole time because I took the picture on a specific day and didn’t remove it – it's kind of like helping people build a wall by making their faces a bit more perfect, so that you can make it look as perfect as the work you and your company do. You can still have a private sphere behind this retouching.

But how far should I go? You can undo the entire retouching process step by step. So, I would always reevaluate: “Did I go too far with it? And what am I doing at the moment?” Beyond that: “Can I still see the person I photographed?” That’s what I would ask myself, and that’s maybe where I would draw the line: Does it still look natural? Whatever that is.

MK: Lukas, what is natural in such a context, given that you’re now engaged heavily with technology and with, I would say, not particularly natural ways of depicting faces and heads. Where is the line for you between the natural and the unnatural? Where is that desire for completeness coming from?

LE: Let me start with the second question, the desire for completeness. Albrecht made some good points for me to follow up on. When I started photography, it gave me the ability to interact with people in whom I was interested. As Sophie said, what interested me wasn't empathy for the person in front of me, it was a fascination for his or her face: the structure; how the eyes were related to each other; how the face looked as a whole, etc. I was definitely not most interested in the social interaction. But then, somehow intrigued by that face, I wanted to initiate social interaction, and photography gave me that opportunity. I had to talk to the person, to invite her or him for a portrait. We would then collaborate on the idea for that portrait before we then made it, and so on. Finally, I would present the finished portrait, which also included moments of social interaction. Here is one of these portraits as an example. It's a four-by-five-inch portrait in black and white.

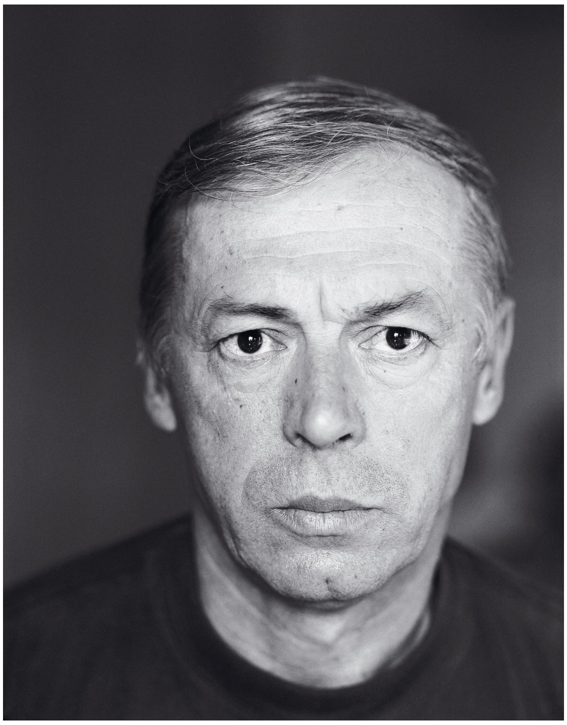

Figure 4: Alija Ibrahimpasic (from Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina) witnessed a landmine accident on March 15, 1999. He was interviewed for "One Step Beyond – The Mine Revisited," Sept. 6, 2003. Photo by Lukas Einsele.

Usually, I would use a Polaroid system for the portraits, which allowed both of us to look at the picture right after it had been taken. This photograph was taken in 2003 in Bosnia and shows Alija Ibrahimpasic, who had witnessed a landmine accident several years earlier. He wasn't injured physically but was very likely traumatized.

The project "One Step Beyond," for which I took more than 50 portraits of landmine survivors, was driven by the question as to whether it is possible with a camera to capture the moment of empathy between us, or to provoke it in the viewer's perspective. Like Albrecht said: How do I feel as the victim, as the survivor? How do I feel as the perpetrator? This is what I tried to portray, to capture with the camera. Furthermore, the question behind making such portraits with landmine survivors was: Is it possible to affect the people who are viewing the portraits, not by showing wounds or missing body parts, but by showing a face, which allows for empathy? Is it possible to initiate a mental interaction between the portrait subject, on the one hand, and the person viewing the portrait, on the other? The connection is a virtual one, but might it be possible to establish such a connection by taking a portrait and displaying it? I increasingly arrived at the conclusion that I had failed, because ultimately, it's a one-sided communication. Only the person who is looking at the portrait is able to have more than a phenomenological approach, to have an empathic approach to the portrait subject. But never the other way around.

So, I began wondering if and how it could be possible to show the collapse of this idea of empathic "interaction" by looking at something one could call a complete face. Might it be possible to visualize the incompleteness of that interaction by showing the incompleteness of the portrait? That could trigger further discussion on how people see and interact with each other. With a photograph, I usually can't show what was (or is) missing. I can only show what is there from the camera's point of view, which is more or less my point of view when I take the photograph. But I cannot show what I didn't see when I took the photograph.

That question inspired me to apply some strange new visualizing technologies, such as 3D photogrammetric visualization or laser scanning. These technologies don't show you what is there, they show you what is not there – that there is something you don't see. I would like to share an example that might help you understand what I'm talking about.

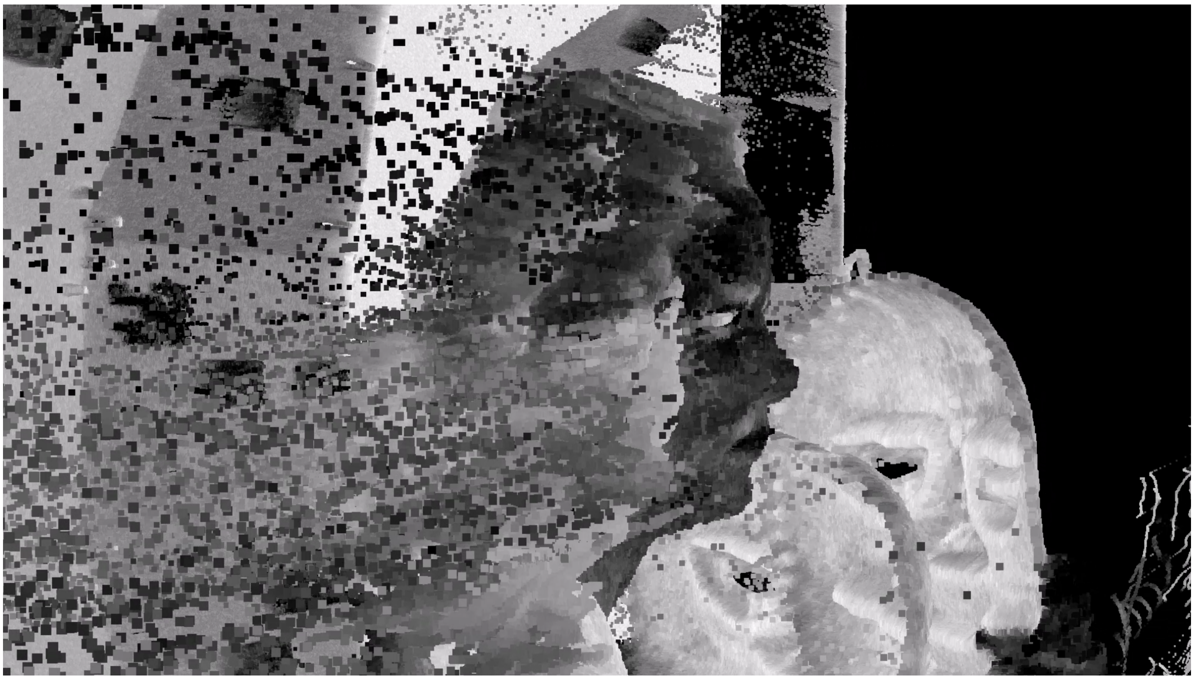

Figure 5: Screenshot from the video Laserportrait im Kopfscanner. Artist: Lukas Einsele.

The video “Laserportrait im Kopfscanner” (See Figure 5) was made using the data from a laser scan. These data consist of millions of measurements from the scanner. Each measurement has its own fixed point and all points together create a so-called “point cloud”. With certain software I am able to move around in this point cloud. That way, I can sort of look behind the person and see that there’s nothing to see, at least not from my original position, the position from which the picture (or the scan, in this case) was taken. The exploration of faces and portraits with the means of 3D technologies, especially in connection with the idea of hiding or veiling a face, the aspect of incompleteness of a face from a position of viewing but also from a position of looking at each other, is quite intriguing to me.

MK: Thank you Lukas. Maybe it makes sense to move to Oliver, since technology seems to be the current focus of our discussion. Oliver, my experience with engineers has been that they try to optimize things to the degree they can. That, basically, is what evolution does too – it designs things to work as perfectly as possible. But I assume there are always trade-offs in designing technology such as the 3D scanner that Lukas is now using. Do you ever find yourself realizing that you can only perfect something from one aspect, but not another? What are the trade-offs that you face when you design technology like the one that Lukas uses? Are there black holes of seeing or understanding, especially if the technology is used with respect to humans? I learned from Lukas that the scanning technology originally comes from a military context and that it was used for measuring spatial distance. And that gets us back to the evolutionary origin of our eyes, which evolved to scan moving distance. Now, we have machines to do that for us; machines that are also used in facial depiction. What are the black holes when it comes to seeing and understanding the human through technology, in particular the face?

OB: For me, the interesting part of this whole discussion and of your project is the fact that our scanners were not designed to scan faces. It may be different with the photogrammetric device that is standing behind Lukas there, but our scanners, as they are sold commercially, are primarily intended for the land surveying business. I think all of you are familiar with the people who stand around on the road sometimes holding a tripod with this little yellow or green device on it, which they use to survey properties or to mark out new roads, new railway tracks, or whatever. A scanner uses more or less the same technology that is in those surveying devices, just that it’s not a human controlling it, but a robotic machine that measures points in vertical and horizontal space in a regular pattern, and is thus able to capture a full panoramic picture. But the idea was to capture existing environments, not people.

In our daily business, faces are increasingly becoming an issue in the data because the technology is becoming more of a commodity and is spreading to all kinds of applications. At the same time, data integrity and data privacy discussions are ongoing, and are even producing laws such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation. Customers are continually asking us: “How can we eliminate the faces in the scans?” Because we want the scans showing the environment – buildings or whatever – to be shared with many people, we need to make sure that personal details, like faces, are removed.

The gaps that Lukas is now analyzing are a big problem when it comes to our original purpose, because we want to create a gap-free representation of the environment. We do that by taking multiple scans of the same objects from different positions. Each of the positions contain obstructive shadows, but by overlaying the positions with each other, you overlay the shadows with the data you got from a different position. In the video from Lukas, both the face and the shadow behind it are kind of unwanted artefacts. We try to perfect our images to remove both from the results.

There are many research projects underway at the moment to automatically detect faces, which maybe brings us back to Sophie’s question of objectifying. At that point, the image of a face is approached as an object and considered to be an object. I try to find it by using learning algorithms, which can identify the pattern of a face. Of course, it won't know if it is Oliver or Maria or Sophie. But it knows that it's a face, and then, of course, I need to do something with that knowledge. In our case, we want to eliminate or anonymize the face. And at the same time, with respect to the gaps in the picture, we are interested in leveraging multiple overlapping scanning positions and using artificial intelligence algorithms to predict, for example, what the wall behind the person in the video would typically look so that we can fill the gap again. In fact, we are working hard to prevent everything that you are analyzing.

On the other hand, whenever I demonstrate the scanning technology to new people who haven't ever encountered it before, it’s interesting to see that they never doubt the technology and never question its accuracy. My personal explanation for this phenomenon is that it all looks so photo-realistic, and everybody knows how to look at photos and what they mean. It’s very easy for everybody to understand immediately what it is.

Then, adding to this perception of photography, or amending this perception of photography, with the knowledge of 3D – that is a small step for people to understand. That, though, then creates the problem that many people don’t understand why – for the software – the nice lady here in Lukas’ video is not a lady. So, there is another process we have to apply. Typically, the scanned data itself is only an intermediate product; you want to create something out of it. Most of our customers create CAD models out of it – of a house, for example. As a user, you look at the wall of the house that was scanned and it’s completely obvious that it's a wall. It's very difficult for users to understand that, for the software, it’s not a wall at all, just a million anonymous points which, perhaps by accident, are close to each other.

MK: That means the machine doesn’t see, right? It just recognizes data points without recognizing them as a wall or a face. At the same time, you said that consumers, or whoever is looking at the results – at the data displayed in a visual interface – have no trouble recognizing faces and bodies. And they don’t doubt the technology – unfortunately so. Would you agree, given your expertise in knowing what the technology leaves out, that the technology is actually interpreting the data, even though it doesn’t see anything? It is, after all, doing something with the data, with the raw data, so to speak. In addition, we know from the debate over facial recognition technology that there are racial biases operative in the machines since the machine learning going on in the background reacts to the social biases that we have. As far as I know, it's primarily an issue with race not with gender, with the result that people of color are less often recognized correctly. There's a higher error rate than there is with white faces.

Are the biases we have as a society and the social structures that lead to a lot of inequality mirrored in the technology? The technology, one might think, doesn't care since it's a machine. But it does have ways of interpreting what it gets from humans, and that interpretation can add to and boost the biases that are already there, or perhaps it even adds biases in a different sense. Do the machines have their very own biases when representing the human? What do you think?

OB: Actually, before you asked the question, I had never thought about it. But I think, with respect to picture recognition and racial bias, the laser scanning technology is super non-racial or anti-racial, because what you see, at least in the gray-scale – the black and white scan that Lukas was showing here – looks like a black and white image, but actually it is not based on colors. It is based on the reflectivity of the surface relative to the specific wavelength of the lasers. As a consequence, the color of the object you are scanning is completely irrelevant. If the shape of the face is the same, it would simply look identical, because the structure of the scan should be the same. The scanner is also sensitive to the humidity of an object, meaning we are unable to scan wet surfaces, but I would expect the level of humidity in the skin to be very much similar in all humans, independent of skin color. Hence, I would expect that, apart from the shape of faces or physiognomic aspects, it should even out that bias.

MK: So you are saying that the machine is color blind and only sees differences in facial structures? But that still doesn't make it blind with respect to these structures, and omitting things might be a bias too. Just so that I understand, because people like me sometimes lack understanding of the technology: When Lukas tells me in our research conversations that this or that is left out, my interpretation is that it comes from the perspective of looking at the object that is depicted. You seem to be saying: "If I weren't a human but a machine myself, I could see the complete picture of the individual that is scanned." Is that right? The machine, in other words, entertains all perspectives simultaneously – like a god, if we assume that a deity, in its imagined omnipotence, can see everything at the same time. Hence, the machine has a godlike phenomenology, one that is total, complete. But that can't be, since, as you said, it leaves out color.

OB: It leaves out everything that is not the superficial surface of the object being scanned. It's an optical measurement device. Let me explain how the technology works. The scanner sends out a laser beam, which hits an object and is then reflected back to the scanner. All the scanner does is measure the distance between the object hit by the laser beam and its own position.

In addition to that, we measure the vertical and the horizontal angle when the scanner is spinning. But every single measurement is only a spatial distance between the scanner and the first object its laser hits. That laser is either absorbed by the object, and we cannot measure anything because nothing is reflected back, or it's reflected back. But it's definitely not going through an object. So, everything beyond the skin, or beyond the first layer of wood on the railing of a staircase, for example, is invisible to the scanner. It's not an X-ray machine, not a multispectral sensor. Everything that is not surface is in principle invisible to the scanner.

You may encounter object surfaces which are not even reflective to the device's laser lengths. Like I said, water simply absorbs the laser. So, any water surface is like a black hole; it doesn't exist in the scanned data. Furthermore, if something is a perfect mirror, the light of the laser is reflected away completely, and not back to the scanner, which means, again, that we cannot measure anything. Irrespective of surface, there are also other potential technological gaps. But one thing is certain: We cannot see beyond the first object. Using the scanner, we will never know what is beyond that person here in the scan that is produced.

MK: It's interesting that surface is such an important category for *how* or *what* the technology can depict. Julie, I have a question to you with respect to surfaces, because you have studied how humans interact – I hope that is the correct term in your philosophy – with *things,* in particular with dolls or human automata, which share the surface of being human, but – as we all know – not the chemistry, not the biochemistry, nor (presumably) the mind behind the surface. Was that similarity on the surface important in the culture of the self that you studied, in the understanding of individuals of themselves as subjects and selves? And what can we learn from history about the importance of the surface for our self-understanding?

JP: I would say that we can learn a lot, and there is a lot of continuity between the terms and the tensions that everyone else has been talking about regarding their areas of expertise. But to go back just a bit, this question about surface shows how diverse the concept of surface is. I think something like race is not only located in skin color. What you were talking about, Maria, when you mentioned physiognomy is that it can also arise in structure. And that's definitely something that physiognomy speaks to. Race has been derived from facial structure, not just skin color. That's important to keep in mind.

I also am struck by how important the concept of technology is. I'm looking at it in terms of my 18th-century perspective – as a medium that allows you to do things. In my first book "The Self and It," I was interested in looking at how objects become a medium for self-formation and self-questioning. And it's important to recognize that the relationship between the self and the object that looks like the human isn't just unidirectional, but the object that looks like the human – such as a doll, a puppet or an automaton – becomes a model for being human. A medium like photography, which has been around now for two centuries, has taken over the 18th-century role of things like dolls and puppets as representational media for self-formation and as models of the desired self.

I think about it in terms of mimetic technology that I was seeing within the 18th-century context and I was struck by what artists like William Hogarth did. He wrote an aesthetic treatise called "The Analysis of Beauty." I would like to show you this picture that's very striking to me. It speaks to the question of why faces matter and why we need to think about dolls in terms of this question, and what the doll is doing in this question regarding the relationship between faces and humans.

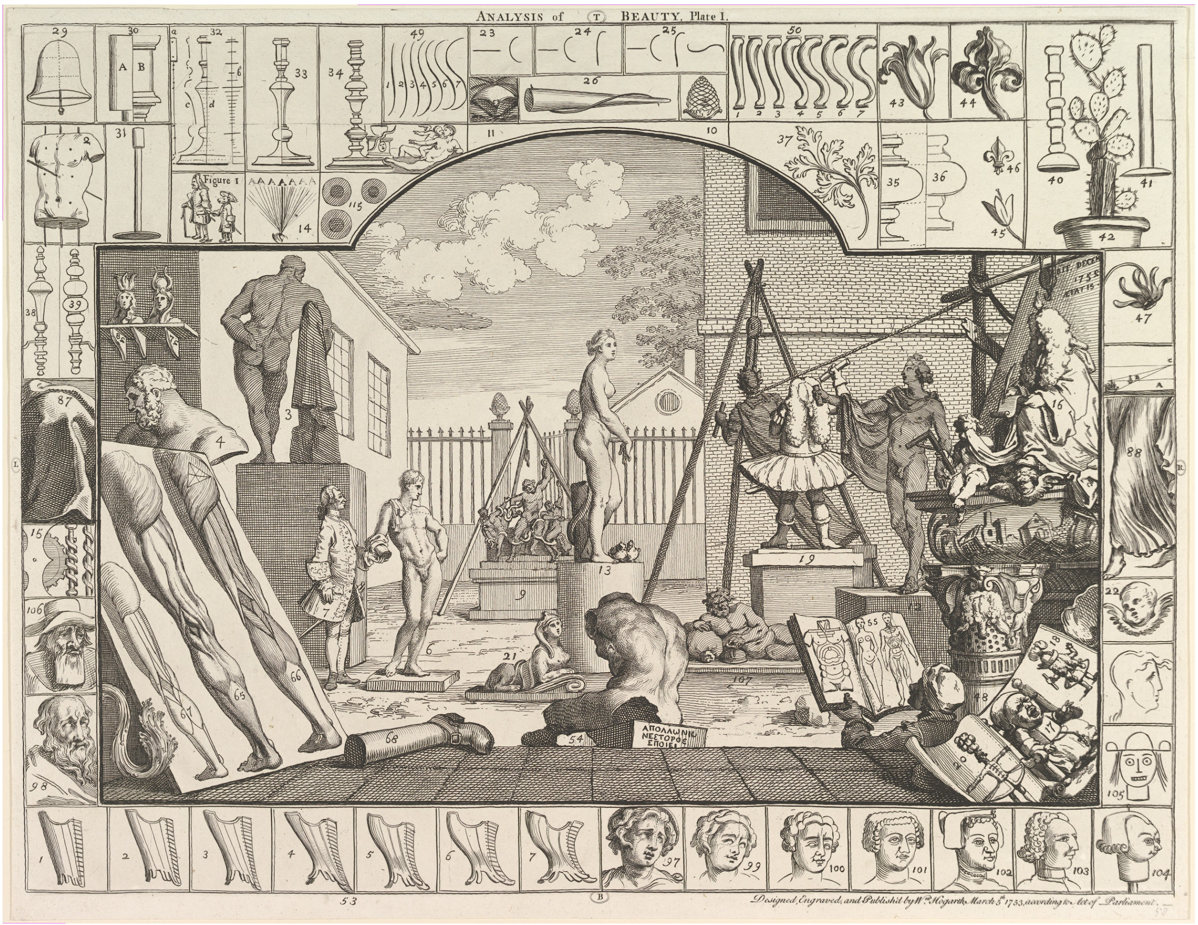
ANALYSIS of (T) BEAUTY. Plate I.
Designed, Engraved, and Publish'd by Wm. Hogarth, March 5th 1753, according to Act of Parliament.
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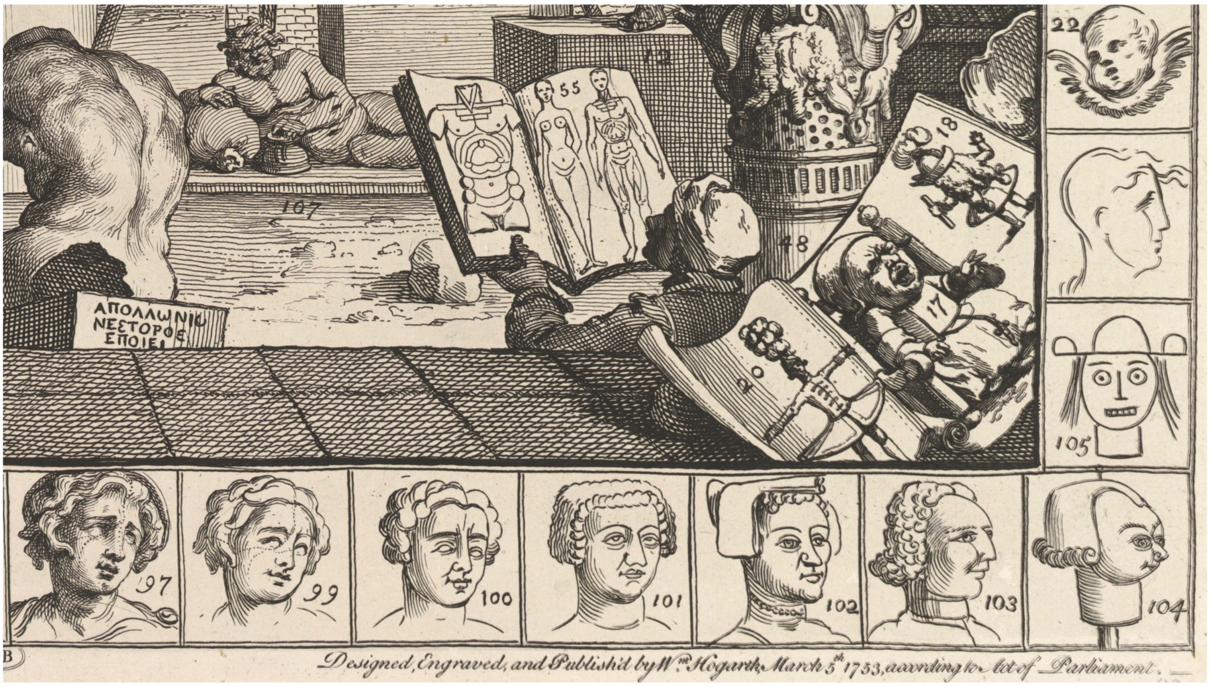
Figure 6: Plate from William Hogarth's "The Analysis of Beauty."

In this plate from "The Analysis of Beauty" (Figure 6), you see an array of different forms that demonstrate beauty and how beauty can be depicted visually. Hogarth's focus was on what he calls the line of beauty. It's a serpentine line and you can see how all these different forms, from a woman's corset to the human face, are being represented in terms of their realism, and the index for that realism is their incorporation of the line of beauty, the serpentine line. The section from this plate that is more pertinent for our discussion, of course, is the lower right-hand corner where the faces are depicted.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Designed, Engraved, and Publish'd by Wm Hogarth March 5th 1753, according to Act of Parliament.

Figure 7: Detail of Figure 6.

You can see how the face on the far left has much drama and emotion, and then you go through this progression of different faces to the right of it. The less realistic a face looks, or the less human-like the face looks, the fewer curves it has in the drawing. It just becomes much more linear.

What I’m trying to say is that in Hogarth’s system, the line itself becomes the technology for depicting the realism of faces. As in Photoshop, where each click of a function or tool adds or removes an element, the adding or removal of a line enhances the appearance of a face in Hogarth’s illustration. I'm very interested in looking at the historical technologies for representing faces and the sort of visual mechanisms that are used for creating faces that evoke emotion and elicit an emotional response, such as Hogarth’s serpentine line.

But to go back to what Sophie was saying about Levinas: I think it’s quite right that when you look at the progression of faces in that Hogarth plate, even the face that looks very linear, like a cartoon human face, still evokes the human. That’s something to think about in terms of the dolls and puppets and automata of 18th-century England that I studied in The Self & It and elsewhere. It didn’t really matter that some of these dolls didn’t have very realistic looking faces. As long as it had the semblance of a face (eyes, nose and mouth), as long as it was a metaphor for a face signaling its existence, it was accepted as representing a human.

This leads to another question about the different indices of the human that we use culturally and historically – not just the face, but also how we interrelate the face with elements or things like voice or fingerprints or touch. There seems to be a whole spectrum of things that can denote the human – that bring humans and sentient beings into relationship and into interaction with each other.

I’ve been involved with kitten rescue during the pandemic. There have been a lot of homeless kittens born because rescue organizations closed their spay and neuter clinics. I’ve been trying to understand the mother’s bond with her kittens. Could she recognize them if she saw them again? I discovered that recognition for cats is not based on face, and I think that speaks to what you’re talking about in terms of focusing on every feature of humanization or dehumanization. Those features are species specific. With cats, they recognize each other predominantly through smell, which underscores how much recognizing another by face is a human function. I want to examine how capacious the face is as a metaphor for the human, and how it’s part of a sign system used specifically by humans to recognize each other, in addition to thinking about the different media and technologies used for representing the face.

MK: You mentioned that the reaction we have to the representation of ourselves in faces – or in things like puppets, dolls or automatons – is an interaction. It’s not just a one-way street, right? The way things are represented speaks back to us. There is a feedback loop, as was mentioned in the discussion with Oliver about what technology ultimately does with us, how we react and how it reproduces things. Let’s look at commodification and how faces are involved in markets, be it markets of vision or just social media. Albrecht has already mentioned commodification. Was there a public face in the 18th century, and was it contrasted with the private face? I mention this because another question I had for Albrecht (which we might be able to discuss later) is: If we fix the public face, the face that is posted to the company's website, what is the relationship to my private face? Doesn’t it change that too? Doesn’t the public face, the representation, speak back to me as well? Do I need to fix my private face? Do I have a private face at all, nowadays? Most of us post more and more pictures online, and the younger the person, it seems, the more selfies they post. Was this culture of selfies already present in the 18th century? I ask this because we can sometimes be rather myopic. We might think something is brand new, but it has actually been going on since at least the Enlightenment or the Early Modern period, or maybe even since Antiquity. With your historical expertise, what can you tell us about that?

JP: I think a good example of how the 18th century was generating a selfie culture is the authorial frontispiece. Books in the 18th century often had an engraved portrait of the author facing the title page in the front of the book. It’s called a frontispiece. Sometimes there were even fold-out frontispieces. One example is a book of collected works by Alexander Pope that came out during his lifetime. He was a very short man, but the frontispiece made him appear imposing and physically impressive, because you’re forced to open the frontispiece and it expands, extending beyond the boundaries of the book. I think that’s one way in which the selfie culture was already part of the 18th century.

Not only that, but in addition to having several portraits and busts made of himself throughout his life, Alexander Pope also had a collection of portraits of his friends on display in his house. It’s almost like he had his own Facebook inside his home. The creation and exchange of miniature portraits also goes back to the Early Modern period. People circulated images of their faces to create social, political and emotional bonds with each other.

MK: I like the frontispiece example. Books were traveling worldwide at the time. But I have another question for you: We had originally planned to also invite Elenoide, a robot at the Technical University of Darmstadt, but she was unable to join due to a technical problem. Robots, especially female robots, are designed to look very humanlike. Some have said that looking into the face of a human-looking robot feels uncanny. You have worked on this feeling of uncanniness, of uneasiness, that comes from looking into the faces of machines. I know it has a lot to do with the literary culture that evolved around the concept of uncanniness, and Sophie also reminded us that Levinas says the face speaks. Where do you think this uncanniness comes from?

JP: My feeling is that the uncanny was not so much a part of 18th-century culture. When it emerges, it sort of announces a change in the human relationship with objects. You can see it emerge distinctly in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story “The Sandman,” which I argue is a story that could only have appeared at the beginning of the 19th century, as a critical reflection on the prior period and its paradigms of knowledge and belief. It dramatizes the effect of the uncanny through the story of a male protagonist who is romantically obsessed with a doll that looks like a real woman. He is puzzled why she never says anything back to him beyond the same few sounds. He hasn’t figured out that she’s a doll.

In researching the status of dolls, puppets and automata in the 18th century, I found that there was a lot of pleasure and sense of possibility in looking at objects that resembled humans. This is different from the uncanny feelings of fear and dread, and the awful sense that one could be an object, i.e. dead. That’s how I would discuss the uncanny: It seems to travel down a distinct cultural-historical path.

MK: It seems that the phenomenon of the uncanny was dependent on a certain literary context and a certain discourse about specific issues, maybe even Enlightenment ideas about technology. After all, Nathaneal, the main character in “The Sandman,” needed to buy and use technology (in the form of glasses) to see the robot as a living thing. Consequently, as Sophie said in the beginning, a face is not just what lasers can measure – its physiognomic proportions and dimensions. In “The Sandman,” it’s the life in the face that suddenly became visible with the technology of the time. At the same time, though, it failed to help the individual recognize reality. It was a little bit of an ironic take, or however we might characterize it in terms of literary categories. Would you say this was a specific historical context, within which there was, as now, a curiosity about the technology available at the time, combined with the usual scepticism regarding novelties?

JP: I think that the mood or the sentiment was more about the delight in the self as another, as opposed to the fear of the self as another. But I think that your interpretation of “The Sandman” is wonderful. It fits in well with the discussion in that it points out how the technology of optics creates the dream of reality for Nathanael. It is perhaps the same way in which we have now become so dependent on the technology of social media and photography to believe that these images of human interfaces are real.

Your interpretation of “The Sandman” underscores the importance of optics. It goes back to what has emerged as a persistent thread in our discussion: the interface of the face. There has to be some sort of interface in order to see the face and represent the face.

MK: That reminds me of the importance of the mirror in traditional belief systems, and also in the cognitive development of infants. We started with the Still Face Experiment, which was about social interaction between the caretaker and the baby. It showed that facial expressions, in particular emotional expressions, matter a lot. At the same time, we know that looking into a mirror is quite important in cognitive development. It is also important when we consider the differences between animals and humans, even if those differences are gradual. Technology probably also gives us a mirror. With respect to that, I quite like your phrase: “There is a delight of the self as another.”

PART II: Open Discussion

MK: There was something Sophie mentioned early on that I found quite interesting, but we didn’t have the time to discuss it in Part I. Levinas, she noted, said that the face invites us to violence. The face has a social side, but it also has this antisocial side. I find that really interesting. Why is the face inviting us to violence?

We know from work done by psychologists, on the perception of the self and the other, that racial biases influence the perception of body size. Not just police officers, but also others overestimate the body size of black men, for instance. Perceptually, it’s like the Müller-Lyer illusion: We just *think* they are big and violent, which leads us to *perceive* them as bigger. How does that relate to the face? And why does Levinas say what he says?

SL: I think he says it because the face is pure vulnerability, in a certain sense. He is saying that the intention of murder can only be directed at the other (and not at mere objects) but that, paradoxically, the other is the one you cannot murder, since the otherness of the other escapes your grasp. For example, it's not much fun trying to murder my table. I mean, I might want to murder my computer sometimes, but in the end, it’s only in the face where you see this otherness. On the one hand, you know that you can somehow get the life out of this body, if you will. But on the other, this is exactly what you will never be able to touch, because if the body is dead, there is just the body. You know that what you wanted to murder is something you can never grasp.

Levinas never intends to say that we are all angels, rather that the vulnerability of the face in fact invites both. It invites a sort of protection, but this protection, this vulnerability, also provokes violence. For me, this is the interesting thing about it: There is so much ambivalence that comes with the living other. So, again, I’m not sure if it is only the phenomenon of the face, but I suppose the face is the most lively part of the living body, the place where you encounter this otherness that you can murder and that you cannot murder.

I wanted to also connect to what Julie said about dolls – about artificial faces and dead faces – and connect to what has been said about private and public faces, because what hasn't come up yet is the mask. It has been there implicitly, but I find it quite interesting that, on the one hand, we seem to have something that eludes, that is alive. On the other, though, we seem to have this fetishism with the face, where everything is there, you know? That seems to be the face of the doll, or the face of the robot, or the face of the selfie, the face where it is still, where it is sort of fixed. I think that might vary culturally and historically, but through all cultures, there are masks with faces on them. We seem to connect to that in a strong way.

There is also the interplay between the face behind the mask and what speaks through it. I just wanted to bring that into the discussion, because that is also where technology has always played a role – in how we fabricate these masks. Today, it's so much closer to our skin, but today, we fabricate masks with our skin, as we have discussed before. I find that quite interesting: This fetishism of the still face on the one hand, and the living face on the other.

MK: And before things like photography or scanning technology was available, masks were a technology of mimesis and representation – and of talking to each other, which is interesting.

LE: I'd like to add a small anecdote: I had a discussion with my son when he started playing the first-person shooter game "Modern Warfare," which is rated for people 18-years and older, but he's only 14. He said: "But daddy, it's not a problem: The people don't really look like humans. They're wearing a kind of mask, sometimes just a cloth in front of the face, and their eyes are these small black points. It's not human. You can also switch off the blood and, if you shoot and kill a person, you can switch off the corpses. So, you don't have to see blood or corpses, and that makes it easier to play."

I'm certain he's not interested in killing; he's interested in gaming. I remember myself playing games that involved killing soldiers, and then later becoming a pacifist. But this ambiguity of the game, which we experience as something extremely violent, direct and confrontative, from one person to another – it's not like that for him. That interested me.

I would like to share a brief outtake from one of the videos, so that you know what I'm talking about. It's from "Call of Duty" (see Figure 7).

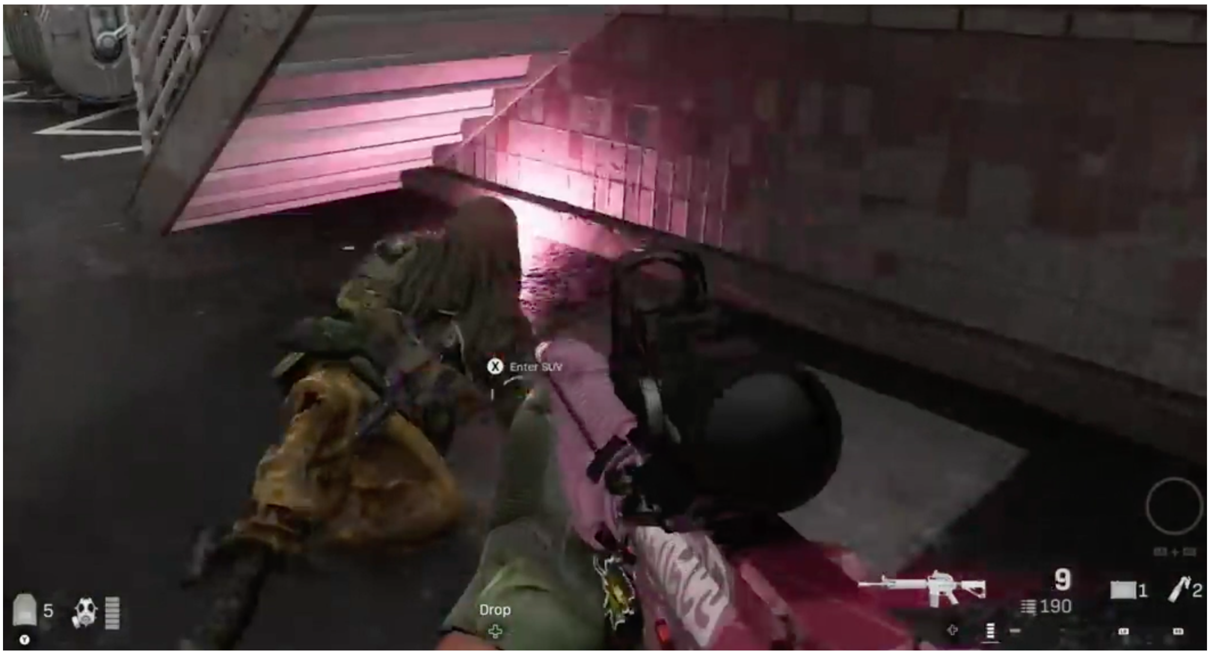

Figure 7: Screenshot from “Call of Duty”

What you see is from the perspective of one of the fighters, with a gun in his hands, chasing for enemies. When two hostile persons meet in the game, then they shoot and try to kill each other. Call of Duty is rated for 18-year-old people. With certain settings, however, it can be down-aged. In one such setting a person’s body “vanishes” from the game as soon as it is killed. Another setting puts a cloth over the face of the enemy so that you do not see his face while killing him. This is just my reaction to the question.

JP: I think the reason the still face is so disturbing (in comparison to a face that is mobile and active) is because it lacks expression. A very striking feature of the face is that it’s a substrate, a medium for expression. It’s where one’s emotions are revealed, and when the face is still, you don’t have access to how another person might be feeling. It also provides information about where the other person is coming from. It's a vital aspect of interaction with someone else.

MK: But if that’s the case, Julie, why do we have death masks? And why do we have so many still faces that don’t talk anymore, at least not in that sense?

JP: I think those are records of the self that is no longer there. It just shows how distinct everyone’s face is – that even when someone is no longer among us, there is still a part of them, the face, that is so distinct to who they are that it’s important to preserve it in the form of a death mask.

MK: Would you say it is culture-dependent? That was one of the questions I had originally wanted to ask Sophie, regarding the claim by Levinas that the face is important for us. Because it could be that faces matter mainly for *our* culture, rather than for all cultures in history or in space. The importance must vary somehow, even if all cultures are likely to have some form of masks and a culture of the face. I would be really surprised if the importance of faces were a stable, rigid thing across all cultures. But I’m lost. I don't know whether there’s variation and what it would mean. I’ve learned that there were Bedouin cultures in which masking your face was a sign of nobility, yet showing the mouth, which is the part of the face that literally speaks, was considered impolite. That's the complete reversal from where we are right now, with all of us wearing masks all the time as part of the response to the coronavirus pandemic. How did we get from there to here?

SL: I would like to add something to that. I’m not a cultural anthropologist, and I would just assume that a culturalized face is rather common. But what is interesting from Levinas’ point of view – in this specific case with its cultural and a religious background – is that he’s actually an iconoclast. He’s opposed to depicting the face because the face is not to be objectified. In the background here, of course, you have Judaism, which does not allow depictions of God, nor does Islam.

There is this slight similarity between how we want to talk about and depict God, and the other, in the face of the other. For both, Levinas would indirectly claim that a depiction is inappropriate. In a certain sense, he would be against all kinds of depictions. This fits into the cultural background which holds that the face is only something to which I might pray, with which I interact, with which I have social contact – but never something that has this stillness. And if we look at Islam and Judaism, we don't have many depictions of humans or of God in a religious context. That may also be a connection.

MK: Why is that the case? I’m not religious, so I have never really understood the rationale behind the idea that you shouldn't depict God. Then you have these rules about veiling your face, or at least wearing a hat. Where is that coming from? Is it modesty or is there something else behind it?

SL: The most problematic aspect is that of creating an idol. It doesn’t matter if it’s a golden cow or the face of God as we imagine him. The core idea is that we will never know, that the human imagination is too small. As such, we shouldn’t strive for objectification; we shouldn’t think: “Now we have it.” I would differentiate that, though, from the other practices you mentioned of veiling faces. I think that might have a different connection.

Previously, I was just talking about pictures. I think the reason for not depicting God is that you must realize as a human being that you and everything else is finite. But if God is infinite, then you must be consistent and not try to transform something that’s infinite into a finite image. You could perhaps call this a kind of modesty. And if Lukas is looking for the spaces that he can’t see, I would also see that as practiced modesty. It's a realization that there is always something that escapes you, and even escapes the technology. The technology helps you see that you have a finite perspective.

AH: Also, if you give form to the face of God, then you have found the final form, perhaps. So, it should remain open: Our imaginations might be stopped if you have a final form. If, a thousand years later, you have a totally different type of haircut, God would be out of fashion.

SL: But isn’t it the same with people? Every one of us has pictures of the people we love.

But we also know that if you have such pictures, they fixate a person into a certain position. It’s a finite way of seeing that person. Even if it's a good picture, there’s always something you're unhappy about. I think there's an analogy here too.

AH: We should further discuss that issue regarding the faces of people we love. We have talked about violence, and how the face supports that violence, but what are we looking for in the faces we try to love or want to love? What kind of faces are successful in Tinder? Is it a kind of perfect face? Are we searching for a perfect face that we can love, or what is it?

LE: If I might make a small contribution from a personal experience regarding your question about how we look at people we love or at people who we are compassionate with. I recently had a cataract surgery. Before that, I was having serious problems with my eyesight and was hardly able to read my mobile phone, even with glasses. And because I couldn’t see them well, people were not very interesting to me. I was interested in what they said, but their faces weren’t interesting to me at all. Then, my left eye was operated on and I could immediately see very sharply again with it. Immediately, I became interested in people's faces again. Because my right eye wasn’t operated on until two weeks later, I realized just how bad my eyesight had been prior to surgery.

Seeing the details of people's faces again, their wrinkles and freckles for instance, reawakened a fervent desire for what I saw and it has created a rather ambiguous situation: Before I could see well again, I was much more interested in what people said and how we discussed. Suddenly, though, I was attracted again by what had ruled my life for so many years: the visible. Now, with my right eye having also been operated on, it’s a switch from, say, the beautifier that Albrecht mentioned – the software that removes wrinkles and flaws from the face – to a clear and almost harsh, yet attractive vision of “everything.” I've returned to the vision side of things, and I have to take care not to be too immersed in what I see, but to still be able to listen. It’s really strange.

MK: It’s interesting that the term “vision” and the term “knowledge” have a common entomologic route, at least in English. It comes from *video,* which is basically Indo-Germanic and leads to our contemporary term “knowledge” (in German: *wissen*), and at the same time to visual seeing. Even though I think that hearing is epistemologically stronger, because it more easily gathers input from all four directions, an aspect which is part of one of the public readings that Lukas and I did from Canetti (a text called “Vortrag eines Blinden” in the collection “Die Provinz des Menschen”), as part of our “Hiding Faces” project.

JP: May I address something from about 10 minutes ago? I’m wondering whether we can make a distinction between different forms of covering the face. On the one hand, we can talk about masks. On the other hand, we can talk about the total covering of the face, which you brought up Lukas with the video clip that you showed. What does it suggest in terms of interaction with the other and self-representation? When the face is completely covered, is that an act of defacement? Indeed, *defacement* is something we should perhaps discuss. Maria and Lukas: You’re doing a project together on defacing the face, is that right? Could you maybe talk about that and how it might relate to what we're discussing now?

MK: We used the German word “Verschleierung,” which we took as the equivalent to the word “hiding,” an intentional choice since the English word is more neutral with respect to the many ways of hiding. Whether you use a mask, a veil, a hood or whatever else, the face is just as absent or fragmented. What “hiding” actually means is a very abstract question – and we have only been engaged in this project for one-and-a-half weeks now, so we don't have any final insights that we can present.

But I liked the phrase that you used: “defacing the face.” It is interesting to me that the importance of the face is not just in our visual culture, but also in our words, i.e. what I am used to studying and analyzing as a philosopher. The word “face” comes up so often in so many English words, and the same is true for German and probably French as well. Wherever you go, it comes up in so many variations, in so many contexts. As such, the importance of the face seems to be ingrained in the language we use as well. And even though Levinas says that the physical face is not so important, I think the physical face explains (in part, at least) why we have the language we have.

For today, we said we wanted to focus more on understanding why the face matters rather than why we hide it. There might be different reasons for why it is important and for why faces are hidden, but they are connected. I don't have the answer yet for why we hide faces. Privacy is an obvious reason, but for me, the other reasons that are culturally deeper connect to words like “shame”, “pride” and “disgust”. They are, for me at least, *the* three keywords with respect to hiding faces.

In the course of our discussion, I have noticed that I'm not sure where the word “emotion” is actually coming from. I began our discussion by making a point about motion, as being behind the importance of the face, at least evolutionarily. I don't know whether the term “emotion” has something to do with the term “motion.” Maybe it does.

SL: Yeah, because it moves. It moves you.

MK: Yes, it moves you. Which raises the issue of vulnerability, because if we move, then our minds move, our bodies move. And that means: We are imperfect. We are constantly in the process of changing. We are vulnerable. And that vulnerability is what makes us human, it makes us social beings and gives us a reason to have emotions – namely, in order to be able to take care of each other. By extension, vulnerability might be what makes the face so important since it can so forcefully display emotions.

As part of the project, I studied Martha Nussbaum's work, not just with respect to dehumanization and what she says about objectification (which connects to what Sophie said about Levinas, that we so often objectify the other), but also with respect to her work on political emotions and why there is shame and disgust. How do these emotions enter our sociality, and why should we keep them at bay? Some people in political philosophy now say, according to Nussbaum, that we should do more public shaming. I think that – unfortunately – recalls the stigma, which at a certain time in history was a physical branding that was literally put on the face. The face and the stigma are concepts that are connected. That's where I'm going right now with my reflections.

JP: Interesting. In the 18th-century context, actively masking the face was often done in the context of social entertainment. Masquerade balls were very popular, and that's another instance in which people delighted in the opportunity to conceal their faces and to encounter others as concealed others. Concealment is also an important maneuver in flirtation. One of the ways in which this project on hiding faces is so interesting and rich is that – as you put it – the notion itself is value-free.

I think it's also a question of what to do to faces to make them matter. One is involved in encountering faces in varying levels of being revealed. And it also becomes a source of power or endows someone with power. You can become more powerful by hiding. It's not just about shame, you also become more powerful if you're faceless. You become more godlike and it removes a source of comfort for the other person. They are no longer able to interact with you as an equal if you remove your face from a conversation.

MK: You are arguing that you become more powerful if you hide your face. That was something I found too in my reading. It is very interesting that in ancient China, the judges had colored glasses (they weren't like ours, though I don't really know what they looked like). They used these colored glasses in order to prevent others from being able to read their face and tell what they think about the evidence. It is basically an example of someone in power, since a judge definitely has power, hiding her or his face in order to maintain that power – because sharing information via the face would mean sharing the power.

I also share your appreciation for value neutrality. For me, the first step should be trying to arrive at an understanding of the diversity of hiding that exists and the second should be acknowledging that things change. After all, we are currently changing the way we react to things and how we behave. The corona masks have become a fashion item already, and they will continue to mutate and develop.

SL: I would like to address this issue because I think there is a very intriguing distinction that Julie made about the potential reasons for hiding. They can provide power or protection. And both have to do with the immediate sociability that is inherent in the exclusivity of the face. If I was the judge and somebody could really see what I was thinking, then I would try to remove myself from this immediate sociability by hiding my face and interrupting that direct social contact.

On the other hand, we talk about shame and being exposed as a body, and here I think we should bring in Jean-Paul Sartre. For him, being a body is being exposed to the look of the other. And this look, interestingly, can become universal – in a way that I think I'm always being looked at. It can sort of become omnipresent – and that is power itself, of course. That is Big Brother. I mean, a look without a body and a face is Sauron, the evil character in "The Lord of the Rings." It is like pure evil, like total control.

I try to hide myself, especially my face, to escape that total look that penetrates me. And just because we're here in this sort of setting: I've had conversations with students, especially female students, who have said: “I don’t want to turn on my camera because I fear that people could take pictures of me, and I don’t want that.” It is such a face culture, with Facebook, Tinder, Zoom, and whatever else, and we are quite exposed to the look of others. But then, if I turn off my camera, only I can look, and you cannot. I find this quite intriguing – thinking about the hiding of the face in this dual aspect of sociability: power and protection.

SSt: If I might add something: Your comments just made me think of a documentary that I saw not long ago about Marina Abramović and her performance at the Museum of Modern Art 10 years ago called “The Artist Is Present.” What you just said, regarding the fact that sometimes you cannot hide your face, and also referring to what Maria said before, this vulnerability that you have, the emotions that you see in a face: Both of them are part of the performance. People could not hide, Abramović just stared at them. She tried to remain neutral herself, just focusing on whoever was in the chair across from her for, I think, seven hours at a time. The performance continued for three months, with a steady stream of different people sitting across from her. Some of the people just smiled, others couldn’t stand it and had to get up, while still others even started crying.

For me, it is sort of like the Still Face Experiment completely reversed: Suddenly, visitors are getting all the attention, and they’re not used to it anymore. This was 10 years ago, and I wonder if it would be even worse now? I’m not sure, because we’re much more used to it as well. In my generation, we don't even like talking on the phone anymore. We’re mostly used to texting, and we're comfortable with this form of communication. Everything has become much more digital. Even now: We are holding this discussion online – because of the situation we’re living in these days, of course. The result, though, is that everything feels much more abstract. What if someone were actually sitting there, facing me, just staring at me, with no possibility for me to hide. Would I be able to stand it? As such, I'm wondering what it would be like if this performance was repeated today.

LE: May I contribute another experience? What you said is very interesting, and I would like to add the opposite perspective, referring again to what Sophie said about Levinas’ thought that the face is extremely vulnerable and makes one aggressive at the same time. Some of you may be familiar with the movie “Peeping Tom.” If not, you should watch it. It’s about a serial killer who’s a photographer. He invites women into his studio and kills them as he is filming, seeking to catch the women's reaction on camera. He encourages them by saying things like: “Look at me, try to look beautiful and fantastic.” But then, he moves one of the legs of the tripod in the direction of the woman, and there's a knife in front of it. He then advances toward the person he’s filming, wanting to see the horror in her face, to film her face at the moment he kills her. That's the first part. In the second part, a woman comes into the studio who is always only visible from one side – for him as well. She's positioned against a window, with only one side exposed to him. Again, he's filming, and again, he becomes increasingly attracted to her. And again, he moves towards her in the usual way. But right at the moment when he raises the knife, she turns her face toward him, and the left side of her face is completely scarred. He immediately pulls back from her and he cannot kill her. He’s disgusted, but also fascinated.

I think what he wanted to kill was the perfection of the face, and as soon as the imperfection becomes visible, either disgust or shame, as you said earlier, Maria, takes over. At that moment, he realizes what he is doing and becomes ashamed and disgusted – and he stops. That may be a reference to this ambiguity of the face that one wants to communicate but cannot, and then you want to destroy it. You want to have this empathic moment, but at the same moment, you are rejected, withdrawn.

MK: It sounds to me like this person's beliefs and theories, or personal character, were in the way, i.e. they prevented him from communicating with people. That’s why he used a camera. No direct interaction was possible for him. He could have easily seen everything he saw without the camera, but he wasn’t able to anymore. As Stephanie said, maybe one result of the 2020 pandemic will be that we are less able to actually face each other in physical, real life because we can’t hide there. Online, we can turn off our cameras if we want to hide. But we can't do that in real life.

Digital culture has an ambivalence too, and maybe that is where we should stop for today. On the one hand, everything in digital culture is at a distance, and we can hide by turning off the camera, which is more difficult in physical space. But at the same time, it’s all so focused on the face, and you can make the face still by taking pictures, which you can’t usually do in physical space, at least not in the normal situations we are used to. And when we meet again physically and thus directly, as Marina Abramović met people physically, we might be overwhelmed, just as the people were overwhelmed during her performance. Even though all she was doing was looking at them.