

The Future of the Face

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Philosophical articulations of the human face in twentieth century philosophy typically share the understanding that the face is never simply a given. While offering different accounts of the human face, the last century has typically conceptualized the face's significance in terms a shared dialectics: a dialectics between, on the one hand, the exteriorization or self-expression, self-presentation, of the face and, on the other hand, the framing of the face by the look of a viewer, that is, a dialectics between a face's look and its being given to the look (gaze) of others.

In this context, the question "how a face looks?" is indeed typically understood – from Sartre to Levinas to Deleuze and Jean-Luc Nancy -- with a double-entendre. And yet, the I-Other dialectics so crucial for thinking the face is not enough – and is, moreover, often an impediment – for recognizing the crucial relationship between the ontological conditions of and the historical space with which the face singularizes itself. In particular, it all too easily covers up the manner in which the face's appearance depends on an ongoing negotiation between the potentialities of vision and signification and their determinations. This negotiation is, as I argue, one that takes place in a historical space in which different forces and procedures participate: power, politics, image-imagination-modalities, technology, language, theory (sociology, psychoanalysis, ethics), etc.

In this paper, I shall be addressing a disturbing phenomenon which I understand as the gradual disappearance of the face from our contemporary life-world. I shall do so, by revisiting a debate between two important, albeit conflicting, philosophical visions of the face, those of Levinas and Deleuze in order to assess whether the grounds of their debate have not already been modified by the conditions of a new medial logic that can be gleaned from today's most ordinary representations of the face, i.e., the Selfie.