

The background of the cover is a complex technical drawing or architectural plan. It features a grid of lines, various geometric shapes like circles and hexagons, and curved paths. The drawing is rendered in white lines on a dark blue background. The overall style is reminiscent of a blueprint or a technical schematic.

Routledge/FACETS Advances in Face Studies

THE HYBRID FACE

PARADOXES OF THE VISAGE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Edited by
Massimo Leone

ROUTLEDGE



The Hybrid Face

This original and interdisciplinary volume explores the contemporary semiotic dimensions of the face from both scientific and sociocultural perspectives, putting forward several traditions, aspects, and signs of the human utopia of creating a hybrid face.

The book semiotically delves into the multifaceted realm of the digital face, exploring its biological and social functions, the concept of masks, the impact of COVID-19, AI systems, digital portraiture, symbolic faces in films, viral communication, alien depictions, personhood in video games, online intimacy, and digital memorials. The human face is increasingly living a life that is not only that of the biological body but also that of its digital avatar, spread through a myriad of new channels and transformable through filters, post-productions, digital cosmetics, all the way to the creation of deepfakes. The digital face expresses new and largely unknown meanings, which this book explores and analyzes through an interdisciplinary but systematic approach.

The volume will interest researchers, scholars, and advanced students who are interested in digital humanities, communication studies, semiotics, visual studies, visual anthropology, cultural studies, and, broadly speaking, innovative approaches about the meaning of the face in present-day digital societies.

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Routledge/FACETS Advances in Face Studies

Series Editor: Massimo Leone

Routledge/FACETS Advances in Face Studies offers a pioneering interdisciplinary collection of research. The series responds to the changing meaning of the human face: through the invention and diffusion of new visual technologies (digital photography, visual filters, as well as software for automatic face recognition); through the creation and establishment of novel genres of face representation (the selfie); and through new approaches to face perception, reading, and memorization (the ‘scrolling’ of faces on Tinder).

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1. The Hybrid Face

Paradoxes of the Visage in the Digital Era

Edited by Massimo Leone

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in the Digital Era

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7 Featureless faces

A film aesthetics¹

Bruno Surace

1. Introduction: can a meme kill?

Can a meme kill? It would seem so, according to a semiotically significant news story. Marcel Danesi, commenting on the nineteen stab wounds suffered by a twelve-year-old at the hands of two of her peers in Waukesha (Wisconsin) in 2014,² affirms that “the world of the matrix is more real and perhaps more meaningful to people today than the real world” (2019: 64). The girl survived by a miracle, and her friends stated they had performed the act as a sacrifice for “Slender Man”. It was therefore in all respects an attempted human sacrifice, made to please (or because forced by) an entity that ontologically does not exist, and that is part of an “online mythology” capable of inducing a form of so-called screen paranoia (*ibidem*). Slender Man does not exist in reality: we can identify its demiurge in Erik Knudsen, and we even have access to the reconstruction of some sources that probably inspired this character’s creation:

At that time, Knudsen used the username “Victor Surge”, a fact that seems to refer to the sources of inspiration for the visual design of the Slender Man. Described as a tall man, dressed in a black suit, and who has a “faceless face”, whose identity it is therefore impossible to recognize, the characteristics mentioned still point to a visual similarity with the character The Question (as it was called in Brazil). Typically a hero with no special powers, the Question was a masked vigilante who used his intelligence and combat skills to fight criminals. His secret identity was protected by a mask that made his face look flat. His real name was Victor Sage, a detail that probably influenced Eric Knudsen’s choice of pseudonym Victor Surge, as well as the lack of facial appearance in Slender Man.

(Bastos Dias 2019: 261)³

However, Slender Man evidently exists as a cultural fact and has very profound consequences on the ontological reality.⁴ We are not interested here in thinking about the psychic disorders of the two stabbers – limiting ourselves to noting the relevance of this paranoid act’s having been carried out by not one but two people (a so-called *folie à deux*) of very tender age –⁵ but rather in how what is in effect a fruit of fiction and human intelligence was able to become the motive (or at least the justification) for such a brutal act.⁶ It is not the only related case:

In May 2015, the New York Times reported that in the previous six months there had been nine suicides and over 100 suicide attempts made by youths living on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. As reporter Julie Bosman (2015) explains, “Several officials with knowledge of the cases said that at least one of the youths who committed suicide was influenced by Slender Man, a tall, faceless creature who appears in storytelling websites, often as a figure who stalks and kills victims.”

(Blank and McNeill 2018: 14)

Our thesis is that not only the narrative substrate but also the somatic specificity of this entity affects its success and can furnish some relevant



Figure 7.1 A cosplay of the Slender Man. Credits: Terry Robinson; www.flickr.com/photos/suburbanadventure/8494619702/; licensed CC BY-SA 2.0.

data in terms of a semiotic anthropology of postmodernity. Slender Man is a meme of a certain kind. It is undoubtedly the best-known exponent of that para-literary form born within the Internet known as creepypasta.⁷ Creepypastas (*portmanteau* of “creepy” plus “copypasta”, an Internet slang expression)⁸ are horror stories, usually written anonymously and disseminated online, starting from a dedicated “wiki” (https://creepypasta.fandom.com/wiki/Creepypasta_Wiki). The objects of these tales of terror are highly varied, but it is no coincidence that some recurring isotopies of this fringe of “digital folklore” (see Sánchez 2018) appear in them: naturally the theme of the paranormal declined in many ways but also a certain protagonist dimension of the media (especially digital) as a vehicle of evil, the presence of adolescent or infant victims/executioners (a direct reflection of empirical/model authors and readers),⁹ and a certain tendency towards seriality (usually achieved through the recurrence of some characters, such as Slender Man) as a trace of that narrative ecosystem that forms and conforms to the tastes of the new generations with increasing vigor.¹⁰ All this is situated on common ground, namely that of writing almost always devoid of strong literary connotations – there is a preponderant interest in content and plot rather than in expression or style – and of a cultural sediment which is a direct consequence of the so-called urban/metropolitan legends of the pre-digital world. In the light of these considerations, a further underlying characteristic of this genre is explained, and that is, a certain disregard towards the historical sources of what are always presented as natural narratives or, in other words,¹¹ true stories:

The Slender Man Mythos unquestionably functions as a virtual world in Saler’s sense: it is a fictional universe which countless individuals from around the world have chosen to both inhabit and build upon through creative contributions in the form of videos, games, and written narratives. The overwhelming majority of these contributors and participants also exhibit what Saler would term ironic belief: they know that Slender Man is a fiction, but winkingly create media that pretend otherwise. But as we have seen, not all responses to fictional media are ironic.

(Tolbert 2015: 50)¹²

All this is true although technically they are often false uchronic narratives as demonstrated by all the creepypastas that are based on Nazism, claiming to build on a historically solid background (since it is surreptitiously assimilated by readers who thus believe they have a true idea of the historical event) when they are rather the result of the unconscious processing of a mythical imaginary already explored in Nazisploitation or similar veins several decades ago.¹³

In this fictional context, Slender Man has assumed, from the year of its birth, 2009, to the present day, a mythological status, to the point of having been relocated transmedially numerous times, becoming a character in video games, cartoons, and even live-action films. It is a malicious



Figure 7.2 An artwork depicting Slender Man. Credits: LuxAmber; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Тонкий_человек.jpg; Licensed CC BY-SA 4.0.

and mysterious entity, clearly humanoid in shape. An oblong, lanky “individual”, dressed in a suit and tie, with a variable number of elegant tentacles protruding from its back, but above all with a face/no-face. Slender Man’s head is white, and where the features should be, there is nothing. The creature is endowed with various paranormal powers and usually targets youngsters or children, kidnapping them or driving them to insanity or self-injury. Its fame is such as to have generated a complex symbolism and an articulated narrative system of roles linked to its figure.

The Slender Man schematically described earlier as “tall, dark, and loathsome”¹⁴ cannot but call to mind several previous references: it is very similar to a contemporary version of the Boogeyman, for example, but also conveys multiple traits of a horror imaginary that consolidated itself throughout the twentieth century in literature and fantasy cinema. The somatic datum, however, is what is most pertinent here. In fact, the character’s features in no way resemble those of a classic monster, except for its tentacles, an iconic remnant of a Lovecraftian background. There are no suckers or burrs. Slender Man’s tentacles are elegant symmetrical filaments, befitting a certain underlying grace inherent in the character. What makes the entity frightening is rather the physical disproportion of its stature, slightly taller than an ordinary human, and above all the absent face, which can only activate a doubly disturbing mechanism:

1. Where there should be a certain system of human apparatuses, perceptually there is nothing, which places the being in a categorical dyscrasia;
2. Where there is nothing, those elements that serve as an “agency detection” portal are missing, and so we fall back into a specific Uncanny Valley.¹⁵

The fact that it is clothed in a suit and tie lends itself to numerous ideological readings but undoubtedly heightens that strange and paradoxical human/nonhuman condition that finds its confirmation and acme in the face. If we think of Slender Man’s visage in terms of a Greimassian articulation, then it is not the opposite of a face but its contradiction.¹⁶ It is a non-face, just as a zombie is not a dead man but a non-dead being. The fact that this specific non-face is thus placed in the axis of the subcontraries, that is, in that semiotically rather problematic gray area, only further motivates its esoteric charm. It is not in fact a representation of the indefinable face, like that – we will get to it – of Marcel Schwob *sans-gueule* (1891) but of the indefinite face. Slender Man’s face is a consubstantial non-face, nor can it be otherwise. The faces of the *sans-gueule* are, at least in their aspectuality, faces that are no longer faces. The two are quite different, although their disturbing effects may appear similar.

2. *Slender Man* – the movie

The Slender Man phenomenon becomes a feature film of the same name with a major production in 2018, directed by Sylvain White. The result is not exciting, according to the critics who generally treat it as an unsuccessful experiment which wastes a potentially interesting character in rather trivial ways. In fact, the film does not stand out either from a formal point of view or in terms of the plot, re-proposing the tired pattern of the teen movie with the theme of evocation. Nonetheless, beyond these value judgments, in the text we find a whole series of elements that corroborate the theses put forward earlier about the characterizations of the Slender Man myth.¹⁷

There is certainly the theme of “media contagion”. The narrative premise is that Slender Man persecutes those who are daring or reckless enough to summon it, an evocation that occurs “virally” – here is the underlying *memetic humus* –¹⁸ through a video circulating on the Internet which contains the secret instructions for this operation. Nothing new, if one thinks of cinematographic cornerstones such as *Ringul/The Ring* (Nakata 1998; Verbinski 2002), *Poltergeist* (Hooper 1982), *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1983), or lesser-known films such as *Pontypool* (McDonald 2009), *Cell* (Williams 2016), and so on. There the “traditional” media were the vehicle while here everything passes through the Internet and the discourses it produces:

[A]s a consciously-constructed sign, Slender Man . . . reflects important semiotic processes at work among members of the various internet communities in which his [*sic*] legend has appeared. The most significant of these processes, and perhaps the area that has seen the most fruitful overlap of folkloristic and literary semiotic investigation, is ostension.
(Tolbert 2013)

Indeed, the Slender Man in the film is not a mystery. Students talk about it in high school, and the idea that it can be evoked with a specific ritual, transmitted through a sort of “electronic gospel” (Mellor *et al.* 2016), circulates as an initiatory myth. In this case, too, an eternal return is reified if one thinks of how many times in past decades the *topos* of the *séance*, held by adolescents in search of a thrill, has constituted the basis for demonic narratives of various kinds. Here, however, there is – in essence at least – the exaltation of a meta-discursive component. The film was born from an Internet phenomenon, to which it refers as a culturally existing fabric in the diegetic premises and even reproduces creepypasta *wiki-style* sites, showing the young protagonists, before and after the evocation, feverishly in search of videos to unravel the mystery of the creature that haunts them, in what at times therefore presents itself as a detective story.

In this spiritism 2.0 the medium therefore not only confirms its role as a vehicle of evil but is also promoted as an investigative tool. The role of the face is clearly paramount, as has already occurred in other films, such as *Unfriended* (Gabriadze 2014), entirely based on a Skype video call in which the ghost of a cyber-bullied girl punishes her peers by making them suffer via webcam, or *Host* (Savage 2020), with a similar plot expressed in a Zoom call.¹⁹ In *Slender Man*, however, the face assumes various roles. There is the face filmed in the video-selfies, which become evidence of close encounters with Slender Man in the woods; the face in close-up, seen during sleep troubled by the nightmares induced by the creature (echoing Wes Craven's Freddy Krueger); the non-face of the creature itself, here whitish and with veins that also make it a sort of mummy; or the faces belonging to the hallucinatory states of the protagonists who see strange figures with a void instead of a face or perceive people's faces as deformed (in this vortex of madness sometimes the faces turn black or are penetrated by tentacles), as happens in other teenage horror movies such as *Truth or Dare* (Wadlow 2018) from the same year, where the deformation of the face is a disturbing element and prelude to nefarious events. Already in *Final Destination* (Wong 2000), however, the initiator of a successful saga, those predestined for death have seen their faces dim in their photographs, and in *Smile* (Finn 2022) an eerie smile is the prelude to a sordid, deadly curse.

The somatic relevance of the character is further testified by a certain iconic obsession that accompanies it. Slender Man in all respects is glimpsed, dreamed, and perceived through various visual indexes (shadows, traces of its appearance in loved ones, and so on). This obviously applies online, and in fact the web is full of videos and photographs more or less clearly created ad hoc in which the character can be discerned, and of course a similar semiotic protocol reemerges in the film. The characters draw it, look for evidence online, and so on. The creature's specific design also makes it particularly inclined to materialize in various pareidolias, just as its reference "habitat" constitutes the mimetic fabric within which it can most visually manifest itself. Among the branches and brambles that become misshapen dark tangles in the night, the creature seems to be everywhere because of its black dress and oblong limbs. The film will eventually merge environment and character when the latter reaps its last victim by literally incorporating her into a tree trunk.

The non-face is the culmination, the ultimate place of making contact. Here, therefore, emerges a further specificity of Slender Man. One should not look it in the face, otherwise madness and, sooner or later, death will follow. So much so that the second evocation in the film takes place right in the woods, where the creature is thought to reside, but with the girls blindfolded. This veiling strategy is in effect a modification of the face through the affixing of a drape that at first sight appears useless, as the eyes already have their own biological ability to eclipse, namely the closing of

the eyelids. However, the tension between fascination and terror is evident, that ancestral curiosity towards the unknown, which requires bandaging as a form of artificial or prosthetic eyelid. Furthermore, this intensifies on the face a strategy of not seeing which is also, phenomenologically, a primitive form of not being seen. Just as children hide under their bedsheets to protect themselves from the monster under the bed, or a cat tries to conceal itself behind a post, the underlying mechanism is a sort of suspension of perceptual disbelief:

Being seen (being witnessed) . . . in non-judgmental supportive somatic explorations is an antidote for depression and builds confidence. Being seen is ultimately about seeing as well. As phenomenology has taught [...] we cannot separate ourselves from the world. We are implicated from the start, as part of the otherness that we perceive to be separate. We are not alone; separateness is an illusion. . . . We might feel alone, however, as a matter of experience. Surely many people feel isolated, and empty sometimes, even those who are for the most part happy. Feelings of isolation and separation arise phenomenologically – as ways in which the world appears to us and is sometimes experienced.

(Fraleigh 2019: 91–92)²⁰

Hiding one's face, or part of it, blindfolding oneself, masking oneself, means not seeing but also not being seen, incorporating in the facial surface – a place of unification of the human senses and antechamber of the most vital of the organs, namely the brain – the wholeness of the body. And yet the bandaged face is also an immediately mutilated face, which protects itself from its own scopophilia but which is also, paradoxically, exposed. Slender Man thus engages in an atrocious form of blackmail: if one wants to dialogue with it, one has to deprive oneself of the most precious – as a place of phenomenological self-certification –²¹ of the senses, building an esoteric language based on deprivation.²² However, this dispossession is like the casting down of a shield, which in the moment of perception of danger one wants to take up again: this happens when one of the girls gives in to the urge to take off her blindfold and has contact with the monster face to face.

It is an impossible confrontation with a lying being, which declares itself human but whose otherness is revealed in its face, making it a transient creature, which can assume a thousand forms. This is a “figure of absence” (Vernet 1988), a personification of fear and representation of evil like its many predecessors in the history of cinema; just think of the cult of Pennywise, *IT*, born from the pen of Stephen King (1986), which later became an iconic TV film in the 1990s (Wallace 1990) and more recently a

cinematographic bily (Muschiatti 2017, 2019). Here the person responsible for the “coulrophobia” of an entire generation constructs fearfulness on mutations of the clownish semblance, which in the moment of revelation passes from affability to hunger, changing its mouth, eyes, proportions, and so on. Slender Man, an authentic case of bricolage, remix, and semiotic mash-up, also appropriates these elements, eventually closing the cycle when, in addition to terrorizing and capturing one by one the four protagonists who have evoked it, the entity also begins to haunt the innocent little sister of one of the victims, driving her insane. This madness, which leads to forced hospitalization (paratopic horror space par excellence)²³ and gruesome facial hallucinations of all sorts, will be expressed in a series of desperate screams: “He was faceless! He was faceless!” As demonstrated by the most typical of cinematographic horror procedures, the “jumpscare” (whose effect proves the importance of the face as a scopic device, which looks at us),²⁴ the initial fright generated by a monstrous face that appears out of nowhere is usually immediately assimilated, and its terrifying potential declines (it is then the task of the diegesis and other formal solutions to keep it alive). On the contrary, if the face is absent, if there is only a head but the rest is missing, then the disturbance is perpetuated like an incessant an-epistemic horizon. As Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill argue: “Fear has no face” (2018: 3).

3. *Ante litteram creepypastas: les sans-gueule*

In 1891 Marcel Schwob published *Cœur double*, a collection of fantasy and horror stories coming a few decades after those of Edgar Allan Poe but absolutely of the same stature. Among these, the short story of the *Sans-gueule* (literally, “The Without-snout”) stands out. It is a heart-breaking tale of two soldiers, found on the battlefield, physically alike and bearing the same wounds: deaf and blind, their faces blasted away by a howitzer. A doctor operates on them and gives them mouths which emit inarticulate sounds. A woman, a “quasi-widow” who is looking for her husband who she knows is missing and wounded, decides to take them both in because they remind her of her lost husband but then little by little begins to prefer one over the other, for reasons that have nothing to do with physical similarities, since the two bodies have lost the traits that made them significantly different (in the full Saussurian sense). Meanwhile, the other’s condition slowly worsens, and he eventually dies, throwing the woman into the despair of uncertainty: she does not know if the one who has left her was her husband or not while the survivor’s living body, totally unaware, continues to smoke from that slit it has in place of a mouth.

Here, therefore, the lost face is a perturbing object as a synecdoche of a dehumanization that coincides with a loss of sociality. The two men are no longer men but completely indecipherable physiologies. They also no longer have an identity. They breathe, require nourishment, and even seem to enjoy smoking, emitting strange gasps when they do so, but the lack of a face has made them something completely different, eliminating any possibility of establishing even the simplest of communications, the phatic one, which enables us to understand if they can hear or comprehend. Whoever does not have a face is eventually in some way stripped, one by one, of Jakobson's communication functions (1963), up to the meta-linguistic one. The face is thus configured as an interface, a linguistic bridge, between us and the other, which if eliminated makes any communicative exchange, any semiotic production, impossible. At most, the poor woman has to limit herself to interpreting these bodies, thus passing to a regime of signification, without ever obtaining confirmation that they are possessed of any initial intentionality. Slender Man is equally frightening somatically because it lacks a *lingua franca*, a common metalanguage, an aid to understanding its intentions.

Schwob's story, therefore, which is initially the narration of the horrors of war through a literary invention that actually reconstructs an episode not so infrequent at the time,²⁵ is also and above all a reflection on the facial device as a necessary threshold for the establishment of a meaningful relationship between us and otherness. The face is a precious sign. This exegesis is shared by a valuable, and very rare, semiotic study of the story:

Structurally, the story pivots . . . on a description of the anxiety to which the "petite femme" is subject by reason of the need to choose between two featureless – not faces – but "surfaces". . . . This passage makes it clear that her careful scrutiny does succeed in distinguishing something equivalent to a "face". . . . But her anxiety stems from the impossibility of discerning a sign that would give one of the Sans-Gueule, but not the other, a face (the face of her husband): she cannot choose between them. So the problem is not to produce meaning by humanizing the faceless surfaces she is scanning; the problem is to opt for one rather than the other as being the "true" or "right" choice, the one that corresponds to her lost husband. The anxiety she displays in attempting to "read," . . . the undifferentiated text. . . . In short, the problematics of reading she is thus enacting derives from the classical conception of meaning as being unique and determinable and subject in consequence to acts of discernment as to the rightness or wrongness of specific "readings": it is reading of the "readable," not the scriptable.

(Chambers 1984: 40)²⁶

And:

At a number of points, the text is explicit that the two Sans-Gueules pose the problem of meaning. At the outset, they are a “double cicatrice arrondie, gigantesque et sans signification,” and later, “les deux coupes rouges couturées reposaient toujours sur les oreillers, avec cette même absence de signification qui en faisaient une double énigme.” . . . Since it is the two Sans-Gueule together who form the mouth (even though each is equipped individually with a “palais beant” and a “tremblant moignon de langue”), the selectivity of love can only be self-defeating, and the production of meaning can only destroy the totality that offered the possibility of meaning.

(*Ibidem*: 42)

The rarefaction of facial features, therefore, from the perspective of a strong relationship between “soma” and “sema”,²⁷ coincides on the one hand with a loss of meaning and on the other with an almost inversely proportional increase in restlessness. Where the face empties, cognition fills with uncertainties and anxieties. In fact, *Les Sans-gueule* seems to prefigure a sort of creepypasta literature, both in terms of the themes and rhetorical choices (the open ending, for example) and on account of its duration (it is a short, immediate story, which begins *in medias res* without getting lost in particular contextualizations). Of course, unlike creepypastas, it claims its own literary dignity, but what interests us is that it constitutes a cornerstone in a potential philology of the face/non-face as a device which elicits anxiety.

The cinema will then become an ideal place for the development of this dimension of the contradicted face, clearly due to its media specificity based on the visual.²⁸ More or less marginal characters, but of great impact, with empty faces, will appear throughout the history of cinema. In the dream sequence in *Spellbound* (Hitchcock 1945), whose setting was masterfully designed by Salvador Dalí, the character played by Gregory Peck relates a specific moment of his dream in which the manager of a gambling house introduces himself, fully dressed, but without a face. In one of old Isak Borg’s dreams in *Smultronstället* (Bergman 1957), a strange man appears, once again well dressed, whose face is a strange two-dimensional surface (as sometimes happens to faces in *INLAND EMPIRE*, Lynch 2006), white, with deformed and rarefied features, and eyes reduced to small slits. One of the witches in Polański’s *Macbeth* (1971) is not only blind but the space where her eyes should be seems covered with skin as is also the case with the young Laura in *Pieles* (Casanova 2017), as if the eyes had never been there (therefore not a space of being that is no longer but a space

of nonbeing). In Joel Barish's twisted dreams in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry 2004), the progressive cancellation of Clementine's memories coincides with the rarefaction of faces. There is a lengthy list of similar examples.

What do all these characters have in common? They are, first of all, always relegated to a dream or hypnagogic dimension, designating one or other space or "allospace" (cf. Surace 2019). They are also marginalized. As signaling of the limen or threshold figures they seem to enjoy a limited cultural autonomy, which explodes in their perturbing power and immediately dissipates. The faceless, in other words, do not seem to have enough strength to hold up a whole narrative; they mostly act as props. This appears not to be true for some cases: one might argue that it is not the case with Slender Man or the *Sans-gueule*. But, in fact, Slender Man is rarely seen. Rather, it can be glimpsed from afar in the pareidolias, hinted at but not clearly shown, and even in the film based on this figure its presence is marginal compared to the actions of the protagonists who struggle to escape it. When it appears it is either dark, blurred, or merely the means to an end (it does what it must do and disappears). Similarly, the *Sans-gueule* are the object of description in Schwob's tale, while the story of the woman is its fulcrum. Most of the aforementioned faceless appear in dreams or magic as figures of passage, memory traces, residues of the unconscious, ultimately functional exclusively to the development of those who still have a face. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the disappearing faces tell us about Joel's memory loss, which we can see very well. In *Spellbound* the owner of the gambling house, representing the metonymy of the white cards thrown on the table, is a sign of the protagonist's mental state. The "face" is therefore not only *interface* but also *surface*, on which traces of us are written – or in some cases erased – as demonstrated by other films, such as *La Jetée* (Marker 1962): "On a primary narrative level, as the protagonist's mind, and the photogrammatic representation of his body, move between past, present and future, the only visual, rather than diegetic clues to temporal location are the repetitions of images, particularly the face" (Chamarette 2012: 79).

The empty face, the removed face, the thin face, or the rarefied face is a generous face in semiotic terms, which abandons the claim to mean something for itself and begins to mean exclusively for the other, to be consumed quickly, and painfully.

4. *Les Yeux sans visage, Le Visage Sans Yeux*

In 1937 the character of *The Blank* appeared for the first time in the famous series of detective comics *Dick Tracy*: a very dangerous killer which is, again, faceless. Covered by a blindfold, the Blank's face hides his identity,

although once “unmasked” he is revealed to be Frank Redrum (read backward and the word “murder” will appear, as anyone who has seen *The Shining* immediately realizes), a criminal with a horribly disfigured face, just like Erik, the *Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux,²⁹ or Spawn, another comic book character created in 1992 by Todd McFarlane, both committed to obscuring their disfigurement.³⁰

These stories introduce us to a further dimension of the featureless face, similar in the disturbing effects elicited by its emptiness on those who see it but dissimilar in the order of the genesis of this emptiness. In these cases, the empty face is in fact not a non-face but a meta-face, placed on an “ante-face” (what remains of a face after an accident or what is behind the epidermis) that is to be concealed, somewhat in the manner of Leatherface in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper 1974), who shows himself only with his face covered by the skin of his victims, thus wearing a full and empty mask at the same time: “Blank masks simultaneously erase identity and create spaces to project new meanings onto, prompting another dimension to the visual iconography of horror film masks” (Heller-Nicholas 2019: 112).

These narratives deal with a face that has been lost. The loss is both physical and symbolic. Sometimes the subject feels that s/he has lost her/his face symbolically and so covers her-/himself in white to cancel a missing identity and seek shelter in a non-identity. Other times, however, it is a physical loss, as happens to Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984), which sanctions the symbolic passage. In short, if soma is sema, it is also true that sema is soma.

In *Les Yeux sans visage* (Franju 1960) this theme is developed through a triple semantization of the face. In the first instance, there is a discourse related to the living face and the dead face. Instead of ceasing its function, the latter becomes the possibility of re-facialization for those who have lost their faces, through futuristic transplants.³¹ The film places the emphasis in this case on the face as an obsession. In fact, the lost face must be regained, no matter at what price, even at the cost of sacrificing more than one person by luring them and taking their face away by force. The second dimension of the face is that of the mask, which Christiane wears, for example, when she does not have an “other’s” face on her. Here we are dealing with a totally neutral mask, in fact, a white face, whose only significant elements are the eyes, alive, which are behind it once worn. The gloomy non-expressiveness of the mask, also conveyed by other films such as *Vanilla Sky* (Crowe 2001), while on the one hand inducing a certain restlessness in the viewer, is at the same time a sign of a lack of acceptance by the wearer, rather as if it were a transitory device, useful only in the limbic waiting to regain possession of a new skin, as happens in *Seconds* (Frankheimer 1966). The third valorization of the face is that which passes from diegesis

to mimesis through the medium of film. In fact, the film not only stages a story in which the face is first lost and subsequently rediscovered, passing through the empty face of the mask but also emphasizes this facial obsession through a calibrated use of the foreground:

It is almost impossible to read about the unnaturalness of the close-up and its association with death without thinking of the classical French horror film *Les Yeux sans visage* (1960), an adaptation of Jean Redon's novel that demonstrates the notion of the close-up as a representation of "dismembered" body, a two-dimensional face severed from its body by the cinematic cut. The uniqueness of Franju's film resides not necessarily in its use of the close-up (although it does that as well) but in the way it literalizes the notion regarding the monstrosity of the close-up in the story it tells. The question that it raises is the following: How does a film "attacking" one of the basic elements of engagement with the protagonist's desire – the face of the actor – affect spectators regarding this very engagement?

(Meiri and Kohen-Raz 2020: 48)

Similar epidermal obsessions can be found in the aforementioned *Pieles*, a Spanish film with a grotesque flavor (not surprisingly a production by Álex de la Iglesia), in which a courageous operation is carried out concerning bodies and faces which are deformed for reasons as imaginative as they are realistic (that is, attributable to existing pathologies). Among the characters can be found Laura who, as we mentioned earlier, has half a face and is eyeless (the place where the eyes should be is covered with skin); Samantha, who manifests a curious pathology whereby she has an anus instead of a mouth (and vice versa); Guile, whose face is completely burned; and Ana, whose left side of her face droops (her pathology is not specified in the film but could be hemifacial hyperplasia). If many of these cases are actually provided with a face, albeit deviant, or as in the case of Guile with an ante-face (there is a very moving final scene in which he looks in the mirror after having undergone a maxillofacial operation, while his ex-beloved Ana proudly chooses to remain as she is), it is Laura's case here that is most prominent, since hers is half a young and pretty face while, vertically, half a non-face. The girl's sad story reveals how she has been locked up in a brothel all her life, in bondage since childhood to afford pleasure first to pedophiles and then when she grows up to women and men whose identity she does not know (being devoid of eyes). One of these gives her two diamonds – telling her: "The world is full of people it is better not to see . . . you deserve the most beautiful eyes in the world" – and puts them on her face like eyes. She will become so fond of them that she will no longer be able to part with them. The outcome of this sort of "symbolic

plastic” is again alienating. In the eyes of the beholder, or at least of those who watch the film, this face with its false ocularity is rather perturbing, reminding the viewer a little of the chilling button eyes in the world behind *Coraline*'s wall (Selik 2009). For Laura, however, these diamonds become indispensable, a form of re-appropriation of the self that passes through a specific somaticity. Only at the end, when she has found the love of an obese woman (who in the meantime has stolen her diamond eyes to pay off her debt), will she be able to accept her half-face and achieve happiness.

Laura's in *Pieles* is a face without eyes, while Christiane's are eyes without a face. In both cases, a new look corresponds to a new attitude, as the claims of *Bruiser*, a 2000 film by George A. Romero, confirm. The director, in fact, after a career spent glorifying the emaciated and indistinguishable visages of zombies, this time depicts the killer Henry who once again opts for a white mask without features: two dot-like holes for eyes, a thin slit for a mouth, and a mere hint of a nose. The identity dimension is once again magnified through the empty face: “Through the blank mask, Henry's monstrosity does not denote an eradication of his identity as such, but a transformation of it” (Heller-Nicholas 2019: 123). Similar are the characters of *The Invisible Man* (H. G. Wells 1881), the last of which (filmed in 2020 by Leigh Whannell) emphasizes the potential of the nonexistent face as a form of anonymity and “passport” for carrying out the worst possible atrocities.

The emptying of the face therefore coincides with the cancellation of a series of stigmas that manifest themselves instead in the counterpart of the “full” face – abnormal, deformed, deviant, as in *The Man Without a Face* (Gibson 1993), in which the protagonist's face is disfigured by burns, and, consequently, he is essentially an outcast, the character of John Hurt in *The Elephant Man* (Lynch 1980), or Roy in *Mask* (Bogdanovich 1985).

5. Conclusions

The figure of the “non-face” thus crosses many narrative spaces, from classical to contemporary literature, from horror cinema to the grotesque, naturally also passing through animation if one thinks of the faceless demon in *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki 2001). It constitutes a degeneration of the face that configures an absent presence of a particularly perturbing character, which potentially magnifies the sociocultural specificities of which the face is a bearer: identity, idea of self, agency detection, aesthetic canons, and the notion of social and personal mask.

The face/non-face induces hesitation precisely because it is devoid of these complex elements, thus leading to a dyscrasia – albeit perhaps a certain fascination, too – in the observer, as in the case of Slender Man but also posing as an ineffable heterotopia that recounts the feelings of those who

are sometimes forced to wear it, as in *Pieles* or *Les Yeux sans visage*. In both cases, however, this interpretation of the face/non-face is often entrusted to the receiver. It remains an enigmatic device, hovering at the edges of the semiosphere (and indeed the corpus of texts in which it appears is significant but restricted),³² a place where the face as a cultural construct is canceled and the humanity of the wearer inferred but not confirmed, as demonstrated by the *Sans-gueule*, machines of flesh that breathe but disturb because in them no specific intentionality can be perceived. On the other hand, this type of iconography, which also arises at times from tragic human events,³³ may culturally cover a specific semantic universe: that of monsters.

It should be emphasized that the etymology of “monster” is that of the Latin “monère”, which means to “admonish” or warn, but there are also links to “show”³⁴ or make something visible.

Monsters . . . are therefore not simple things or events but always require: a) to be recognized as such and b) to be interpreted. . . . However, the same things may not always produce the same emotions, and this obviously also applies to the monsters proper, called to generate specific emotions, of a repulsive nature, as Benveniste has already told us, such as fright or terror. In order for these emotions to emerge, the manifestation in the phenomenal field of some *deformity* is necessary, which inevitably appeals to a canon of forms, and consequently to an idea of *conformity*.

(Lancioni 2020: 84–85)³⁵

The face/non-face cannot be beheld but comes into view as a “manifestation in the phenomenal field” relegating itself to it immediately relegates itself to the domain of the most irreducible otherness. That on the margins of the semiosphere – that of monstrosity, be it demonic, as in the case of Slender Man, or extraterrestrial, as for the “gray men” of *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (Spielberg 2001), oblong like the monster of creepypasta tales, humanoid, with heads, but without any facial features. This monstrosity finds in the “empty” signifier of the empty face the springboard for a specific meaning, which is otherness. Thus, in the end, this peculiar facial dysmorphia transliterates from the level of expression to that of content, from a formal level to an ideological and political one, capable of recounting the anxieties and fears, but also prejudices and limits, of certain cultures.³⁶ Verily, just as there are cultures of the face, there are also cultures of the non-face.

Notes

- 1 This chapter results from a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant Agreement No 819649-FACETS; PI: Massimo LEONE).

- 2 The story of the trial elicited great public interest and was extensively dealt with in both the American and international press. See www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-slenderman-girls-adult-case-20150810-story.html (last accessed 05 January 2021).
- 3 My translation from Portuguese.
- 4 I reflected on this peculiar connection between the imaginary and the real in Surace (2020b) unicorni.
- 5 We limit ourselves to suggesting that since it is not an act committed by a single person but rather a “shared brutality”, the social role assumed by the imaginary linked to Slender Man is relevant enough to warrant dealing with the matter not only exclusively in psychiatric terms but also in semiotic terms.
- 6 This is not the first case, and even in the pre-digital world episodes can be traced in which a certain maniacality deriving from fictional imaginings was then dangerously transferred into reality. In this relation we consider the burgeoning field of criminal humanities to be of great importance (see Arntfield and Danesi 2016).
- 7 “an emergent horror genre that manifests through the form of digital fiction, characterized by unsettling paranormal and horror content copied, pasted and remixed on social media and Web 2.0 platforms under the guise of real and lived encounters” (Ondrak 2018: 162). See also Chess and Newsom 2015.
- 8 See Page 2018; Henriksen 2018.
- 9 The concepts of author and model reader are found in Eco 1979.
- 10 On the notion of narrative ecosystem, see Pescatore 2018.
- 11 The notions of “natural narrative” and its opposite “artificial narrative” are in Eco 1994, and respectively designate a text’s claim to be read as reporting truth (as in the case of a news program but also of an urban legend) or fiction (as in the case of a fantasy or science fiction novel). That a narrative presents itself as natural or artificial is not an explicit fact but has to do with the strategies of drafting the text itself.
- 12 The reference is to Saler 2012 who “has discussed the capacity of certain works of fiction to effectively transcend their own fictionality, to create imaginary worlds that become, through deliberate inhabitation by their audiences, virtual worlds” (Tolbert 2015: 50).
- 13 Cf. Magilow *et al.* 2012; Fedorov 2018.
- 14 Cf. Peck 2022.
- 15 I investigated this concept in Surace (2021b) with specific reference to artificial and robotic faces.
- 16 Cf. Greimas 1966.
- 17 We refer to it as a myth, naturally in terms of the mythological reading of society proposed in Barthes 1957, but also relying on the idea of contemporaneity as founded on “low-intensity myths” (that is, in short, less powerful and persistent, more ephemeral and transient) in Ortoleva 2019.
- 18 On the phenomena of online virality see, firstly, Marino and Thibault 2016, for a compendium. An initial but good definition, which is the one underlying our use of the term, is the following: “First of all, we have to point out that we are dealing with two different forms of virality, which may be complementary but nevertheless need to be kept theoretically separated: the first one entails a piece of media content spreading pervasively and the other entails the practice of creating other contents from a first one understood as the model or prototype. In the latter case we have a token that establishes a type from which other tokens are created by means of replication and modification; this is what happens with memes, which we may conceive, with a pun, as a form of ‘complex virality’ (as opposed to ‘simple virality’). As suggested by Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013),

- we may articulate the opposition between an old and a new model of content use: the first one, called stickiness, defines when many people in one place are enjoying a given content (as in the case of a successful article or website) and the latter, called spreadability, applies when one content is placed almost literally everywhere for everybody to peruse with ease (as in the case of a viral picture or video or of a series of memes with the same base). What we call virality, including both types described above, owes as much to the replicability as to the customization allowed by digital technologies; it is not merely an issue of copying a given content, but rather of adapting, appropriating and properly translating a given content according to need” (Marino 2022).
- 19 It is evident that, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic, with its overbearing remodeling of the global imagination and the reconfiguration of common proxemics, has also played a fundamental role and perhaps above all in the way our faces mean outside and inside the digital context. See Leone 2020.
 - 20 On this point, it is possible to approach it with a more psychoanalytical gaze, for example, Lacan 1991, and philosophical, Žižek 2000.
 - 21 As proof of this, just think of the great and lasting (so much so that it has its roots in the origins of the web) success of online videos that prove conspiracy theories visually. The basic idea is that “sightings” or in any case visual evidence are more effective than other types of evidence. A video showing aliens in one’s backyard will receive more hits than an alleged declassified document from any government in which evidence of the same fact is set out in writing.
 - 22 And in fact, if one thinks about it, one can “lose” face, thus effectively losing one’s reputation (and this is a fact shared culturally from West to East, so much so that in China a common insult is to say that someone “has no face”), or one “wants to lose face” to protect oneself even from embarrassment as in the case of the “facepalm”, a veiling of the face analyzed in Marino 2020.
 - 23 The notion of paratopic space is taken from Greimas’ theory of the relationship between space and narrativity. Specifically, the paratopic space is understood as the space in which certain skills are acquired by the characters in the story. See Greimas 1976.
 - 24 See Surace 2022: 78.
 - 25 It was not, nor is it unfortunately, merely a literary invention. War wounds have always disfigured thousands of faces. As regards the twentieth-century wars, here you can find photo albums of plastic surgery practiced at the King George Military Hospital in London <https://wellcomelibrary.org/item/b20160999#?m=0&cv=0&c=0&s=0>; regarding more recent wars an interesting interview with Col. Robert G. Hale, commander of the Army’s dental and trauma research detachment at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio for the New York Times, can be found at www.nytimes.com/2013/12/03/science/healing-soldiers-most-exposed-wounds.html?pagewanted=all (last accessed 05 January 2021).
 - 26 Here specifically Chambers reflects on the following passage of the story: “Elle allait éternellement de l’un à l’autre, épiant une indication, attendant un signe. Elle guettait ces surfaces rouges qui ne bougeraient jamais plus. Elle regardait avec anxiété ces énormes cicatrices dont elle distinguait graduellement les coutures comme on connaît les traits des visages aimés. Elle les examinait tour à tour, ainsi que l’on considère les épreuves d’une photographie, sans se décider à choisir.”

- 27 The fertile soma/sema formula has a long philosophical history that dates back to Plato's *Gorgias* and goes as far as the post-structuralist works of Derrida 1972 or the semiotic works of Fontanille 2004.
- 28 On the importance of the face in cinema, from its origins, see Jandelli 2016.
- 29 Relevant in this sense is the question that Strong puts at the beginning of his bioethical reflection on facial transplantation: "If the Phantom of the Opera were offered a face transplant, would he have the capacity to say 'no,' or would he be so desperate for a new face that he would grasp at straws?" (2004: 13).
- 30 On the relationship between body image and disfigurement, see Rumsey and Harcourt 2004.
- 31 Today, face transplantation is a scientific reality, also thanks to the pioneering work (not only in the medical field but also in the bioethical field) conducted by researchers such as Maria Siemionow. See her 2019 volume in which she reconstructs the stages, including the philosophical ones that led to her first face transplant.
- 32 The notion was codified by Jurij Lotman. See Lotman 1984. For a good definition see Cobleby 2009.
- 33 Proof of this are precisely those people who, for example, victims of an accident, lose their faces and need a transplant or cases in the news such as that of the child born in Portugal without facial features: www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50166857 (last accessed 05 January 2021).
- 34 See Benveniste 1969.
- 35 My translation from Italian.
- 36 On these topics see also Surace (2020a) culture.

Filmography

- A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven 1984)
A.I. Artificial Intelligence (Steven Spielberg 2001)
Bruiser (George A. Romero 2000)
Cell (Tod Williams 2016)
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Michel Gondry 2004)
Final Destination (James Wong 2000)
Host (Rob Savage 2020)
INLAND EMPIRE (David Lynch 2006)
IT (Tommy Lee Wallace 1990)
IT (Andy Muschietti 2017, 2019)
La Jetée (Chris Marker 1962)
Les Yeux sans visage (Georges Franju 1960)
Macbeth (Roman Polański 1971)
Mask (Peter Bogdanovich 1985)
Poltergeist (Tobe Hooper 1982)
Pontypool (Bruce McDonald 2009)
Pieles (Eduardo Casanova 2017)
Ringu (Hideo Nakata 1988)
Seconds (John Frankenheimer 1966)
Slender Man (Sylvain White 2018)
Smile (Parker Finn 2022)

Smultronstället (Ingmar Bergman 1957)
Spellbound (Alfred Hitchcock 1945)
Spirited Away (千と千尋の神隠し, Hayao Miyazaki 2001)
The Elephant Man (David Lynch 1980)
The Invisible Man (Leigh Whannell 2020)
The Man Without a Face (Mel Gibson 1993)
The Ring (Gore Verbinski 2002)
The Shining (Stanley Kubrick 1980)
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper 1974)
Truth or Dare (Jeff Wadlow 2018)
Unfriended (Levan Gabriadze 2014)
Vanilla Sky (Cameron Crowe 2001)
Videodrome (David Cronenberg 1983)