

# The Semiotics of Noncompliant Faces: Disfigurement, Visible Difference, and the Need to Spare the Face

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**Abstract:** The article presents a semiotic mapping of what is generally regarded as “disfigurement”, both as an extralinguistic somatic condition and as a linguistic-conceptual unit. It distinguishes between genetic, traumatic and elective “disfigurement”, also addressing the idea that such a phenomenon is to some extent structurally linked to the very existence and functioning of the face which we use as a relational interface. The article reconstructs the lexical semantics of “disfigurement”, including the alternative terminology that goes beyond derogative intent and is referred to by activists and experts as “visible difference” (title’s “noncompliant faces”). Representation in the media, particularly cinema, seems unable to escape the chain according to which ‘different’ means ‘ugly’ and is a synonym for ‘bad’ or at best ‘negative’. The face, traditionally an invisible filter defining personhood and identity in Western thought, when “disfigured” reveals the ideological overlay of these concepts. The conservative and authoritarian nature of the face (the supposed index of the form of life that lies beneath and is reduced to it) compels those who cannot or will not base everything on the face, and thus risk being dehumanized, to imagine alternatives for vicarious identity expression through a relational interface that can detach themselves from the biological face and the body perceived as a delimited realm.

**Keywords:** disfigurement, noncompliant face, semiotics of the face, visage, visible difference.

“I went to the mirror this morning / I looked  
in the mirror instead / The first thing to come  
into focus / [...] Was a face wrapped all  
around my head / There’s something  
sticking out of the middle / I guess it’s my  
nose, I suppose / I just don’t recognize those  
eyes / All these years I’ve been watching  
from the other side”

Todd Rundgren, *I went to the Mirror*, 1973.

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## 1 Introduction: Disfigurement Between Exception and Norm

What is generally regarded as “disfigurement” may be caused by genetics, trauma or the unwanted side effect of an intervention of some kind on the body. As such, it is perceived as an exceptional condition: in one way or another, it is regarded as a deviation from the norm. In the following three subparagraphs, each and one typology (genetic, traumatic, elective) will be briefly introduced, defined and exemplified by means of notable case-studies.

### 1.1 Genetics

Nathan Cajina is a young man from Orlando, Florida, who uploaded his first video to TikTok in 2020, on his twenty-first birthday. Today (November 2024) he is followed by more than two million people with a total of over eighty million views. Cajina’s videos take the form of comic sketches, but his description on the app (and on Instagram, where

he has more than 95,000 followers) reads: “My goal is to inspire you all”. Cajina suffers from “a mysterious condition that caused half of his face to have deformed”<sup>1</sup>: he was born without the nose, without an ear and one of his eyes and had to undergo 37 surgical procedures at a cost of over one million dollars. In videos in which he often has family members and other “accomplices” as guests, Cajina jokes about his condition with surprisingly black humor; for example, he plays with TikTok filters, many of which are based on the bilateral symmetry characteristic of the human face and therefore fail to correctly recognize his.

The video that introduced me to Cajina (uploaded on March 22, 2023, today with more than three and a half million views) shows him as “My doctor for all of my 37 surgeries to fix my face”: dressed as a surgeon in an operating room, Cajina is not holding scalpels or similar tools, but a baseball bat with which he delivers violent blows to the head of his patient (played by the same actor, himself). The message is clear: if the result looks like this after so many operations—Cajina still has a visibly “disfigured”, “abnormal”, “deformed” face—the surgeon must have acted like this while the tiktoker was lying on the operating table under anesthetic<sup>2</sup>. In his most popular video to date (uploaded on 20 April 2023, 43.5 million views), Cajina grimaces at a child he meets in an elevator<sup>3</sup>. In 2022, he took part in the TV show *Dating Different*: the girl he met, Tiana, said she was willing to go out with him because “Nathan is nice and sweet and his face has nothing to do with his personality”<sup>4</sup>. **[end of page]**

## 1.2 Trauma

Harold Gillies (1882-1960), a New Zealander educated at Cambridge, UK with a specialization in otolaryngology, is recognized as one of the most ingenious pioneers of modern aesthetic surgery<sup>5</sup>: he performed the first of a long series of facial reconstructions in 1917 when he operated on the English sailor Walter Yeo (1890-1960), who had lost his eyelids and the ability to close his eyes due to severe burns he had suffered during the Battle of Jutland. Gillies patented a technique in which undamaged skin is taken from the patient’s body (skin graft) and implanted into the damaged area. This is the direct precursor of the actual face transplant (facial allograft, i.e. removal of the face of a deceased donor), a treatment that was technically possible in the late 1990s (the first autologous face transplant was carried out in 1994 on a nine-year-old Indian girl, Sandeep Kaur), but was only performed on the 38-year-old French woman Isabelle Dinoire in 2005 after a fierce and sometimes surreal bioethical and media debate<sup>6</sup>.

Soldiers have always been the main patients for any kind of facial trauma and for decades the US military has been the main investor in the field of facial transplantation. Looking at pictures showing many of these patients, it is hard to believe that these faces disfigured by wounds could belong to people who are still alive: faces disfigured by injuries are almost always censored by newspapers and news outlets, while equally shocking medical

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<sup>1</sup> *How Will My Blind Date React To My Facial Difference?*, on the YouTube channel “truly”, January 11, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fCd4pkTIV0>.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.tiktok.com/@nathan\\_1424/video/7213145962993192234](https://www.tiktok.com/@nathan_1424/video/7213145962993192234).

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.tiktok.com/@nathan\\_1424/video/7088465042991025454](https://www.tiktok.com/@nathan_1424/video/7088465042991025454).

<sup>4</sup> *How Will My Blind Date React To My Facial Difference?*, cit.

<sup>5</sup> See [15]. Today the term “aesthetic surgery” is increasingly considered problematic as it implies a trivialization of aspects that cannot be reduced to purely aesthetic issues.

<sup>6</sup> See [3]. Facial transplantation is a particularly complex procedure because, depending on the case, not only skin but also other types of tissue (muscles, bones) are affected. Even if it is successful, there is a constant risk of rejection, forcing patients to take immunosuppressants for the rest of their lives and struggle with severe side effects, also of psychological nature.

images, such as those of patients disfigured by diseases like syphilis, are not. This selective censorship seems to confirm that the face is not just a sign, but a deeply intertextual, discursive—in a word, narrative—semiotic magnet. In other words, disfigurement caused by disease may be shocking, but disfigurement caused by violent trauma is even more disturbing. The American Anna Coleman Ladd (1878-1939) was a sculptor who specialized in making plates of sculpted and dyed galvanized copper to serve as masks for soldiers whose faces had been injured and disfigured; the craftsmanship and mimetic effectiveness of the prostheses enabled patients to regain what they had lost: their humanity.

### 1.3 Side Effect

Celebrity plastic surgery disasters are a particularly popular visual genre, turned into endless galleries by the tabloid press on the model of “before/after” comparisons. Never absent from these surveys are figures who are often treated as modern-day freaks, such as Donatella Versace, Jocelyn Wildenstein, Courtney Cox, Melanie Griffith, Mickey Rourke, Carrot Top and the Bogdanoff twins.

One of the most striking and complex cases of a “surgical nightmare” is undoubtedly that of Pete Burns (1959-2016), the singer of the band Dead Or Alive, made **[end of page]** famous by the dance new wave hit *You Spin Me Round (Like a Record)* from November 1984. Burns is a guest in the first episode of the second and final season of the *Celebrity Botched Bodies* format airing on the UK’s Channel 5 (September 15, 2016; Burns died of a heart attack just over a month later) and he confesses to the cameras. He has undergone more than 300 surgical procedures (“I am completely addicted, [...] for me, surgery is like buying a sofa”), is on the verge of bankruptcy and his health is severely compromised. But still: “I see myself as my own clay [...] I have staples, nuts, screws, stitches, all sorts of things. I’m Frankenstein, but I’m feeling wonderful. I’ve got complete flexibility, not tightness at all”. And he adds with his typical wit: “I hope when I’m 80 and I get to heaven, God doesn’t recognize me”.

His first operation in 1985 was a rhinoplasty to repair a broken nose, as the singer realized that he had become, in his own words, a “visual entity” and felt he needed to protect his appearance as much as possible. However, this procedure was only the first in an endless series of disasters: Burns wakes up covered in blood. But that does not stop him from soon pursuing an uncontrollable obsession aimed at the utopia of a perfect face. In 2006, after dozens of operations on his face, cheeks and lips, at the end of his appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, Burns realizes that the pus from the injected fillers has spread to other areas of his body and is beginning to ruin his skin. The infection spreads to his Adam’s apple, eyes, liver and kidneys, and clots and embolisms form in his legs, heart and lungs. Burns eventually loses all his teeth. Throughout this, since the late 1980s, Burns has gone to great lengths to feminize his appearance while always emphasizing his masculine, one-of-kind identity (his autobiography, published in 2006, is titled *Freak Unique*; see [5]).

If there is now a category to indicate the flattening of aesthetic standards to those dominant on social media (referred to as “Instagram face”)<sup>7</sup>, dictated by influencers and responsible for a sort of widespread “facial injustice” (to paraphrase *au contraire* the SF novel by L.P. Hartley)<sup>8</sup>, the obsession with cosmetics and the mass legitimization of

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<sup>7</sup> See [50].

<sup>8</sup> In this dystopian novel [21], a favorite of Anthony Burgess, the dictator who rules the remnants of the world “strongly encourages” all women to undergo facial plastic surgery to take on the appearance of the Beta model, the insignificant, mediocre woman (while the Alphas are the beautiful and the Gammas are the

invasive cosmetic surgery have long been aptly treated with the narrative style typical of body horror<sup>9</sup>.

Evoking the world of cosmetics, we move from the exceptionality of what we commonly call “disfigurement” to its normalcy. [end of page]

## 1.4 Normalcy of Disfigurement

If “disfigurement” is an intervention that alters the naturalness of the face, one might conclude that this device, practice or process is, by and large, part of the ordinariness of our experience.

It is an intervention of alteration, always additive in nature, that allows the face to exist as a relational interface and sociocultural construct, and the same is true of what we have learned to encode as beauty (think makeup or jewelry): humans define themselves as such precisely because, since the biblical Genesis, they have intended to equip themselves with prostheses and thus renounce the supposed naturalness of their biological bodies, including their own face as a “mask degree zero”<sup>10</sup>. In comparison to a barely definable but equally ponderous and obtrusive average and standard face, even a grimace, the expression of a passion that takes over the body and turns the face into its projection surface, leads to disfigurement. There is also a processual and unavoidable phenomenon that acts as a change to the face in every respect: aging<sup>11</sup>.

It is clear, however, that it is not in the interest of semioticians to extend disfigurement to infinity—if only to normalize it—and that it is indeed entirely in their interest to seek a restricted and operational definition of this category.

## 2 Semantics of Disfigurement

Disfigurement is as much a somatic phenomenon as a conceptual and, thus, linguistic one. It is not possible to outline a semiotics of disfigurement without taking into account the stratification of semantic facets implied in its definition.

### 2.1 Disfiguring and Defacing

In classical Latin, the terms for an intervention that damages the face are etymologically connected neither with the term “figure” nor with “face”, but exclusively with “form” (*deformo*) and “beauty” (*deturpo*, *depravo*). Only in late medieval Latin they are explicitly linked with “figure” (*diffigurare*) and “face” (from *facies* through the mediation of the Old French *desfacier*).

In English, the most commonly used term for damaging the figure and face is “to disfigure” (i.e. “to spoil the appearance of something or someone, especially their face, completely”, according to the Cambridge Dictionary), which retains the root of figure. Other terms are also used which have a more heterogeneous semantics: “to deface” (“to damage and spoil the appearance of something by writing or drawing on it”) and “to efface” (“to remove something intentionally”), derived from face but with a figurative sense, and “to scar” (“to leave a scar”, i.e. “a mark left on part of [end of page] the body

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ugly women), in order to eliminate all inequalities and envy. The protagonist, Jael 97, is an Alpha who rejects the transplant.

<sup>9</sup> See [41] and [22]; see also films such as *Death Becomes Her* by Robert Zemeckis (1992), *Neon Demon* by Nicolas Winding Refn (2016), *The Substance* by Coralie Fargeat (2024).

<sup>10</sup> For a semiotic discussion of this topic, see [30].

<sup>11</sup> For a semiotic discussion of these interrelated topics (wrinkles and aging), see [18].

after an injury, such as a cut, has healed”). All these terms appear in the lexicon between the middle of the fourteenth and the end of the fifteenth century. The term “faceless” (lit. “without a face”) also has an exclusively figurative meaning and refers only metaphorically to the face: it is said of something that has “no clear characteristics and therefore [is] uninteresting”; the term is thus synonymous with “anonymous”, not in a biographical or authorial sense, but in an axiological sense (such as: soulless).

From these definitions we can deduce at least two things: that the human face embodies the concept of figure par excellence and that this concept concerns both the material world and the world of abstract values. We know that one can “spoil” and “damage”, i.e. disfigure and deface, both by adding and by taking away: let us think of the mustache that Duchamp added to the Mona Lisa, or of the faces of the sphinxes that were deprived of their noses. The disfigurement then seems to configure itself as a gestural chiasm, a sign with an ambivalent character: a subtraction that adds something (the presence of an absence, as in an imprint) and an addition that diminishes something (an external element disturbs an equilibrium).

## 2.2 Visible Difference

As can be seen from the figurative meanings just mentioned (and as can be easily imagined when thinking of one of the most indelible connotations, that in which abnormality, ugliness and dysphoria are linked), the term “disfigurement” is not neutral, but “may carry derogative associations which serve to stigmatize those who have an atypical (facial) appearance” [52: 285]. For years, activists, operators and academics have been campaigning to achieve “face” or “facial equality”, which includes changing language habits. The British association Changing Faces suggests using “visible difference” instead of disfigurement<sup>12</sup>; some authors use “facial difference” (e.g. see [43]). We may also speak of “noncompliant faces”. “Disfigurement” and other similar terms should then always be understood to be in quotation marks, not simply to designate a word that denotes a condition, but a real cultural unit as such, charged with its connotations.

This alternative terminology does nothing but emphasize the non-transparency of the facial device, something that visible difference as an extralinguistic phenomenon simply incarnates and lays bare. All the definitions and considerations presented here must then be integrated with those from the legal field<sup>13</sup>. Visible difference is a crucial topic for several reasons, especially for semiotics and legal semiotics: it [end of page] could be the ideal bridging object for the discipline to finally find access<sup>14</sup> to the medical humanities (see [8]), a field that seems ideally suited to semiotics but in which it has not yet found a place.

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<sup>12</sup> The webpage with suggestions for the media, online since 2021, is: <https://www.changingfaces.org.uk/for-the-media/media-guidelines-disfigurement/>. Changing Faces was founded in 1992 by James Partridge (1952-2020) following the publication of a surprisingly successful autobiographical book from 1990 [34]. In a car accident in 1970 the man suffered severe burns to almost half of his face, upper body, arms and hands. In 2017, Partridge left Changing Faces and founded the NGO Face Equality International (<https://faceequalityinternational.org/>). Another classic in this field is the memoirs of Lucy Grealy from 1994 [19], who suffered from Ewing sarcoma.

<sup>13</sup> Elio Lo Monte [28] deals, for example, with the case of Article 583-quinquies of the Italian Criminal Code, which concerns the offence of “disfigurement of appearance by permanent facial injury”, introduced by Law No. 69/2019, also known as the “Red Code”, enacted to combat gender-based violence.

<sup>14</sup> Via a semioethics (one cannot but think to the lifelong work in this field of authors such as Gianfranco Bettetini and Augusto Ponzio) which is in fact a semioemics or simply ethnosemiotics (namely, semiotics in an emic, community-internal perspective).

### 2.3 Disfigurement as Unveiling

“Disfigurement” does indeed have a component of revelation. Following Jean-François Lyotard [29], in the Figure he opposes to Discourse (understood as a logical, rational and linguistic domain) there is something unspeakable: disfigurement tears the figure and exposes the unspeakable. It seems to tell us, in a violent way, that deep down we are not so unique, that it takes so little and it is so easy to lose something on which we focus and invest so much: the face.

If we take seriously what is stated by James Porter (qtd. in [32: xiii]), namely that a disabled body is at the same time “*too much* a body” and “*too little* a body”, we can frame the traumatically revealing paradox of disfigurement in the idea that it is simultaneously *too little* and *too much* a face, an *exhausted* face and a face *to the extreme*. If disfigurement is the disruption of the figure in its entirety and inner coherence, then it represents a disruption of the figurative regime of the face: it disrupts the mechanism of signification (the association of Expression and Content) which allows one (1) to identify precise figures (eyes, nose, mouth etc.) in the face and (2) to identify the face itself as a figure, and which allows (3) the one who “wears” the face to be recognized in turn as a figure (in other words: as a subject, person, individual). Disfigurement then plunges the signification “downwards” into a decidedly plastic regime in which we no longer recognize figures of the world that play thematic roles, i.e. narrative functions within a story, but only formal traits that are detached from their nameability (we no longer recognize eyes, nose, mouth, face, person).

A disfigurement that cancels the possibility of recognizing a face and thus of recognizing a person in this (non-)face is reflected in the neutral theatrical mask studied by Francesco Marsciani [31], to which the Italian semiotician attributes a “lack of enunciation” (It. *enunciazione mancante*). As a matter of fact, it is true that people characterized by visible difference have the feeling of “not having a voice”. Particularly relevant in relation to this impossibility of expression is the case of Möbius syndrome, a pathology that prevents the movement of facial muscles, including those of the eyes, and thus the expression of emotions (see [9][10]). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wondered whether subalterns could really speak up in discourse; and we might legitimately ask whether the person with visible difference can still have the right to a face (a relational interface as a means of expressing identity) despite having lost some or all of the biological surface we traditionally assign to such a function. **[end of page]**

### 3 Representation of Disfigurement

A consequence of both the somatic and the semantic, “disfigurement” is crystallized in a highly connoted and stereotyped visual imagery and media representation.

“How does someone use facial ID when they are disfigured?”. This is a question that was asked in Apple’s online community on September 6, 2021<sup>15</sup>. In a world where identity is increasingly understood as a constructed and polyphonic process, facial recognition systems are by definition ableist, as they assume that there will always be a face to recognize (only the very latest versions of smartphone operating systems, for example, manage to recognize a face partially covered by sunglasses or a medical mask).

Beyond the anecdotal and metaphorical, it is true that people characterized by visible difference discursivize their condition by speaking of a difficulty or even impossibility of

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<sup>15</sup> <https://discussions.apple.com/thread/253115899>.

social recognition. This is a larger proportion of the population than one might expect: in 2019, a fifth of people in the UK “selfidentify as having a visible difference such as a mark, scar or condition” [7: 2]. In 2022, 50% of people with these characteristics in Canada reported that they had experienced some form of discrimination or workplace violence because of their appearance [14: 9].

As studies show, the representation of “disfigurement” in audiovisual media is accompanied by a dysphoric uncanniness<sup>16</sup>. Appearance, identity and identification are always closely and deterministically linked: changing one’s face means becoming someone else and intervenes in the past (in family relationships) and in the future (in morality; those who change their face do so in order to behave differently than they always have). It is therefore considered unacceptable in the cinematic world; it is tantamount to a lie, a sin, and is an act that must be punished.

If most people develop their own ideas of disability primarily through cinema, television and literature [33: 15-45], the representation of visible difference plays a central role in positioning this form of life within the shared imaginary. As summarized in a position paper by Face Equality [14], for nearly a century cinema has exclusively assigned antagonistic, subaltern or dysfunctional roles to “scarred” characters: the villain, the vigilante, the victim, the outcast. It seems impossible to assume a normalization of visible difference and, above all, to shake off the connotative chain according to which “disfigured” is ugly and ugly is, if not exactly bad (“anomalous is bad”, see [51]), then at least negative. Not to mention the inversion of the paradigm. **[end of page]**

## 4 A Philosophy of Disfigurement

“Disfigurement” holds the traits of the negative, both denotatively, as a somatic phenomenon, and connotatively, as a cultural one. Still, it is possible to overturn this disposition and conceive it heuristically, as a conceptual tool.

### 4.1 The Dialectic of Disfiguring

Mark C. Taylor is an American philosopher, author of a monumental and controversial work which, starting from the title [48], proposes the ambitious project of reading art, architecture and religion as unified phenomena under the banner of a single category, disfiguring. The text further develops some theoretical lines that the author has already outlined earlier and which he will also take up later. Taylor does not use a truly argumentative style but, in keeping with a training rooted in deconstructivism, a form of “argument by example”. His thesis is that 20th century art can be divided into three distinct movements, periods and modes, each characterized by its own form of disfiguring.

During Modernism, the desire is to reduce and purify every form of expression, even at the risk of eliminating any form of individuality (Taylor rather uninhibitedly overlaps

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<sup>16</sup> Sharrona Pearl is an American media scholar who specializes in medical ethics. She has worked on physiognomy [39] and published a volume whose three main themes—ethics, image and technology—were held together by the meta-theme of the face [35]. In her work *Face On*, published in 2017 [36], which deals with “disfigurement” and face transplants, she analyzes, among other things, three classic films in which the self-determination of one’s own identity and the acquisition of a “new face” through state-of-the-art medical technology is decidedly punished: *Eyes Without a Face* by Georges Franju, 1960, France; *Seconds* by John Frankenheimer, 1966, USA; *The Face of Another* by Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1966, Japan. Pearl has subsequently explored the extreme terms in the continuum of facial recognition, namely people suffering from prosopagnosia (face blindness) and those labeled as super recognizers [37], and the cultural meaning of masks after the Covid-19 pandemic [38].

Modernism and totalitarianism). Accordingly, the disfiguring promoted by this movement, says Taylor, is the total elimination of any type of figuration. Postmodernism “disfigures” the previously affirmed abstraction by reintroducing the human, anthropomorphic element and the taste for ornament (for “deforming, defacing, or corrupting”, [48: 9]). Taylor states that a painting like *No* (1961) by Jasper Johns “disfigures the dis-figured surface of abstraction” [48: 176]. If Modernism is focused on transcendence, Postmodernism is focused on immanence, but both only pursue their own utopia: the first rooted in an ideal reality that eliminates appearances, the second in the realm of merchandising where appearance and image are everything (Andy Warhol, says Taylor, would seek redemption in the multiplication of appearances).

## 4.2 Disfiguring as a Means to the Indefinable

Neither of the two modalities identified so far, Modernism (disfiguring figuration by means of abstraction) and Postmodernism (disfiguring abstraction by means of reintroducing figuration), is acceptable for Taylor. The solution would instead be a form of “authentic postmodernism”, best represented by his “a/theology” (and “a/theo-aesthetics”) which “explores the middle ground between classical theology and atheism” [48: 4], “trying to figure a disfiguring that struggles to figure the unfigurable” [48: 9-10]. Taylor chooses carefully the artists suitable to serve his theory. For example, Anselm Kiefer, whose painting *Zim Zum* (1990) is used as the cover image of the book and of which Taylor says [48: 304-305]: **end of page**

[it] is, in my judgment, Kiefer’s most magnificent and most troubling work. In this painting he pushes art to the point where something that is not and yet is not nothing “appears” by disappearing. [...] Kiefer’s disfigured canvas brings art to the limit where it trembles with the approach of an Other it cannot figure.

Another artist Taylor relies on to explain his theory is Peter Eisenman, the designer of the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (1989), an architect who states that the purpose of his houses is “shatter the sense of comfortable complacency” by “alienating people from their environment” [48: 257]. Says Taylor: “Something is forever missing from Derrida’s texts and Eisenman’s architecture. They are always writing and building something else—something that cannot be written or built but can only be traced by a certain disfiguring” [48: 265].

Figuring and disfiguring are identified as co-dependent as they represent the oscillating interaction between stability and instability, or order and chaos, in religion<sup>17</sup>. Disfiguring means recognizing that something cannot be represented or understood. Far from being simply destructive, it is what keeps figures open and posits the condition of emergence of creation. The figures, Taylor repeats *passim* in a subsequent work, always include something that can neither be represented nor understood, they are “disfigured from within” [49: 20, 119, 307].

Taylor’s proposal to reverse the deep meaning of disfiguring from the negative to the positive is not in itself very original (this applies to the claim to systematicity that animates it and which is also the component of his theoretical gesture that may deserve

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<sup>17</sup> The figure/disfigurement circuit presents the same characteristics of circularity as normalcy/disability, as expressed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder [33: 181]: “the very concept of normalcy by which most people (by definition) shape their existence is in fact tied inexorably to the concept of disability, or rather, the concept of disability is a function of a concept of normalcy. Normalcy and disability are part of the same system”.



the most criticism)<sup>18</sup>, for it represents the theological variant of the well-known postmodern theme of the palimpsest, particularly indebted to hauntology (the ghostly ontology, the inability of the present to shake off a past that is no longer but has not yet completely disappeared, of which Jacques Derrida speaks): just as the traces of an erased former usage remain visible as transparency on an ancient manuscript, so the erasure of the once-worshipped deity returns to haunt the skepticism of Taylor's a/theology<sup>19</sup>. **end**

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## 5 The Face as an Ideological Filter

Can the human being renounce the face, one's own face and the face of the other? Perhaps only if they decides to do so. That is, if one decides to *renounce* being human or to *redefine* what it means to be human<sup>20</sup>.

A semiotics of the face can then be traced back, in this perspective, to a question of modality, that is intentionality (having-to vs. wanting-to), and of semiotic status (necessity vs. convention). To understand the meaning of the face, that is, according to Ferdinand De Saussure, its value, and, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, the pragmatic effects it entails, it may then be necessary, following the teachings of Umberto Eco (a system should be able to normalize the cases that would seem an exception to its rules) and Juri Lotman (it is in the periphery of the semiosphere that the most significant phenomena occur and the dynamics of cultural innovation are activated), to turn one's gaze to what is not a face and to what the face is not, to what is opposed to the face and to its possible boundaries.

A filter is something like an addition-that-removes and a deprivation-that-allows, acting on virtuality and enabling a certain faculty or action, making something actualizable that would not be possible without it. The filter thus appears on the one hand as an impairment, on the other as a prosthesis. For the semiotician, then, the filter is an axiology, a system of values selected based on what linguists call valence (the value of value, whereby not all values have equal importance): the filter selects certain things, lets them through, and leaves out others (in Peircean terms, the filter would be an Immediate Object, the pertinentization of an Object, called Dynamic, otherwise unattainable). When the filter intends to be perceived as a transparent device, that is, does not intend to be perceived at all and thus poses itself as invisible and inevitable (just like a camouflaged trap), it is the expression of a particular axiology that does not admit the possibility of choice outside of it: an ideology (Roland Barthes, Eco, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi).

If the face—normal inasmuch normed and in turn normative (it is Erving Goffman's face-work, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *visagéité*)—responds to these characteristics and thus poses itself as an ideological filter through which, at least in the West, we have

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<sup>18</sup> Influenced by the psychoanalysis of Melanie Klein, Adrian Stokes [45: 24] speaks of "art as reparation" from an original defacing gesture: "A painter [...] to be so, must be capable of perpetrating defacement; though it be defacement in order to add, create, transform, restore, the attack is defacement none the less. The loading of the surface of the canvas, or the forcing upon this flat, white surface of an overpowering suggestion of perspective, depth, the third dimension, sometimes seems to be an enterprise not entirely dissimilar to a twisting of someone's arm". "Disfigurement" or "defacement" is indeed a term with its own history in the biblical-theological (it is a hapax in the book of Isaiah; it is a concept present in Paul Beauchamp, the scholar who proposed the notion of "deuterosis") and psychoanalytic realms.

<sup>19</sup> It may be interesting to triangulate the reflections of Lyotard and Taylor with the analyses of the medievalist and historian of modernity Valentin Groebner [20], who sees disfigurement as the failure of the figure as form: a series of images that generate terror in a regime of *Ungestalt* (formlessness, unrecognizability – also understood as a denial of the face – and thus indescribability).

<sup>20</sup> The two opposing positions are Giorgio Agamben's pandemic humanism [1] and Benjamin Bratton's post-pandemic transhumanism [4].

always defined concepts such as personhood and identity, we must look for “abnormal” faces that pose themselves as opaque, non-ideological filters capable of making us exit from this “facial realism.”<sup>21</sup> [end of page]

## 6 Figuring Disfigurement Out

### 6.1 Appropriating the Face

We know with Jacques Lacan and the mirror stage that self-awareness is literally a reflection of the recognition of the thirdness of one’s own image. I discover that I exist when I objectify myself, I recognize myself because I see myself exactly as I see the other. Semiotics, in its own way, has always talked about identity as an affirmation of an alterity in relationality, following the lead of structural linguistics. In order to return to oneself and affirm one’s autonomy from the gaze of the other, one cannot omit the other. One can always and only accept their own face insofar as it is “other”. Taylor [48: 288] explains it well, glossing over Michelangelo Pistoletto’s work *The Shape of the Mirror* (1975-78) in his signature deconstructionist idiolect:

Staring at myself from behind the mirror, I discover the blindness that has always been inherent in my insight. To know myself, I must reflect on myself by returning to myself from my exile in others. My unity, in other words, is not originary but is secondary to the reflection that is impossible apart from the I’s/eyes of others. Pistoletto forces me to realize that these others scatter rather than consolidate an I that was never one in the first place. Drawn into the draw of the mirror, I gradually realize that I never have been, am, or will be one. Rather, *I am no one*.

When “disfigured”, “visibly different”, that “face wrapped all around [our] head”<sup>22</sup> forces us to look at ourselves in the mirror and question the concepts of personhood and identity. Robert Hodge, “born with deformed legs and facial tumor” as newspapers headline when presenting his story, prominent spokesperson of the visible difference community, explains it well with simple and direct language (genuinely animated by a motivational drive) during a TEDx talk in 2015<sup>23</sup>. At 14, faced with the possibility, thanks to yet another surgical operation (“by then I’d had about two dozen operations”), to “look a bit more normal”, Hodge must make a decision:

I sat down with [...] at the same kitchen table when my brothers and sisters had voted to bring me home 14 years earlier [Hodge is adopted] and talked to my parents about it. My brother was there listening in and we talked about the opportunities and the risks and he stayed silent the entire time until we brought up the fact the operation could cost me my eyesight. He then piped up and said: “What use is it being pretty if he can’t even see himself?”. In that instant I owned my face. Until then my life had been governed by my appearance but I had never had much say in that. Decisions were made about the fate of my face by my parents, by my doctors, by social workers, by kids teasing me. And [end of page] the comment from my brother made me realize that I had a choice and I could actually own my face by exercising

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<sup>21</sup> The reference is obviously to Mark Fisher’s “capitalist realism”: it is easier to imagine the end of the world as we know it than the end of the dominance of the face as a criterion for defining the human form of life. In terms of the personal branding paradigm, one could also speak of “facial capitalism”.

<sup>22</sup> See Todd Rundgren’s song *I Went to the Mirror*, from the album *Something/Anything?* (1972); quoted in the exergue.

<sup>23</sup> *Own your face* | Robert Hoge | TEDxSouthBank, on the YouTube channel “TEDx Talks”, Feb. 3, 2015, <https://youtu.be/QbxinUJcLGg?si=Kf-M7V3tl-eSg4rZ>.

that choice. I didn't figure I'd necessarily ever be worth painting but I was done with being the doctors' canvas. I think it was the right decision. [...] Funnily enough my ugliness made it easier for me to own my face than many of you.

Years later, a friend of Hodge asks him if he can make a portrait of him. After a few sessions, when the work is finished, Hodge finds himself in front of the completed work.

Until then I thought owning my face meant no one else could own it. But I looked at this portrait disturbed, voiceless, silent, crying, because it seemed to me that Nick had gone and owned my face for me. It seems like this portrait captured every piece of pain, every bit of life I had felt since I was 14. And I think the important thing there is plenty of other people will try to own our faces, but have they put a million brushstrokes into owning our faces. You can own your face too. Owning is choosing.

## 6.2 Turning Face

Sharrona Pearl [36: 170-176] discusses some examples of what would be, in our terms, a face-work and *visageité* that is not hetero-direct but self-imposed: people who claim a freedom of intervention in their own bodies and faces that aims at an ideal of self-determination that is profoundly human precisely because it is radically different from a purely biological dimension. The actresses Joan Rivers and Lolo Ferrari, the pop star Michael Jackson, the performance artist Orlan, the musician Genesis Breyer P-Orridge—and one could also include Pete Burns—are not victims, but creators of their own “disfigurement” or “visible difference”.

Their cosmetics is radical, their masking intended not as concealment but as the deployment and revelation of a form (of life) that can only in this way be realized, manifested, substantiated. In this path of modification, in this adjustment of the body—as the “outside”—to an “inside” (a founding principle of every makeover process, Pearl comments; we would say, a Hjelmslevian principle), some important differences may be highlighted. If Rivers and Ferrari, Jackson and P-Orridge each in their own way pursue an ideal of the hybrid that mirrors Donna Haraway's cyborg theory by subjecting themselves to interventions that are nothing more than the necessary means to “become oneself”, for Orlan the interventions themselves represent an end, albeit a paradoxical one: Orlan would seek, for Pearl [36: 172], a “permanent state of becoming”, of “infinite change”, of “nevercomplete”. However, all of them are united by publicity, that is by the public status and even by the spectacularity of the process of which they have become activators and protagonists, *Destinateurs* and *Destinataries*.

Tiktoker Nathan Cajina [see par. 1.1] is neither a World War I soldier wearing an extraordinary copper mask created by Anna Coleman Ladd [par. 1.2], nor a body artist undergoing tattoos, plastic surgery and hormone therapy [par. 1.3], yet he does nothing but use the technological and sociocultural filters [par. 5] at his disposal [end of page] to perform his identity in the making. Unlike the soldiers of the Great War, Cajina uses the TikTok filters not to cauterize or erase his own diversity, but to enhance it, amplify its visibility, and make it clash with the (ableist) ideologies on the basis of which these technologies were developed. If it can be difficult to accept what we have been given without the possibility of choice, it seems a much more plausible goal to accept what one has chosen to do—to be.

### 6.3 Conclusion: Sparing the Face

At the end of her literary investigation dedicated to beheadings, Regina Janes [23], in response to a world subject to the regime of the monocephalus, rigidly hierarchical and fearful of multivocal and centrifugal figures such as the Hydra, ideally opposes a world without a head, a horizontal, anarchic, leaderless world: perfectly visualized by the figure of the *Acéphale* drawn by André Masson in 1936 for the esoteric community led by Georges Bataille [23: 178]. If the face is an invasive, normative and conservative apparatus, making everything so that we cannot do without it, we do not so much need to modify or reform it, Janes suggests, as to cut it in order to imagine a truly alternative system.

If, by basing our notion of personhood and identity on the face, we cannot break out of the chains of association according to which only the face can signify embodied presence, authenticity and truthfulness, and its denial only dysphoria and dehumanization, then perhaps, as Jenny Edkins [13: 163] suggests, “we need [...] to dispense with the idea that the face is a mirror to the soul, a window on emotion, and a signifier of a unique, inviolable and recognizable identity”. If ideologically, at least in the world we can define as Western, the face is everything to the person, what do we do with the persons who do not have a face (anymore)? We must strive to give a face back to those who have lost it, and not just any face.

Doing without the face can mean very different things: being able to do without it when this is necessary, but also programmatically working towards getting rid of it. Both cases must somehow be traced back to the mode of willing in order to be pursued. Pearl specifies that such a program is about renouncing the index (“fuck the index”, [36: 177]) and seeking a “non-facially oriented relationality” [36: 87] that does not disregard the body (the scholar alludes to a haptic relationality) but is prepared to go beyond it (“We might begin to answer Donna Haraway’s famous question, ‘why should our bodies end at the skin?’. Simply, according to Lévinas, they don’t”, [36: 165]).

After we have semiotized the face, questioned its naturalness and primacy, it makes sense to return to it and our need for it with fresh eyes: precisely because we want it to be a space of construction and not of necessity, it belongs to us and we can own it. Dealing with cases in which, precisely because the face is radically denied, there seems to be no alternative to it (in “encoding”, as in the case of visible difference, or in “decoding”, as in the case of prosopagnosia or face blindness), forces us with even greater strength to imagine possible alternatives. Indeed, we must imagine devices for identity expression that constitute our relational interface capable of **end of page** dispensing with the body surface wrapped around our head and perhaps even with the body as a whole, understood as a rigidly delimited perimeter<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> I must postpone considerations of a non-face which is not the denial of the face but something beyond-the-face, to future works. In the present text I could not address explicitly many sources I have consulted so as to outline a personal pathway to the semiotics of disfigurement and visible difference (a scientific project I started working on in January 2021). For a reconstruction of the scattered semiotics of the face (based on texts by authors such as Roland Barthes, Hubert Damisch, Patrizia Magli, Omar Calabrese, Umberto Eco, Paolo Fabbri), see [30]. Recent studies within the semiotics of the face addressed the issue of “disfigurement”: [25], [17], [18], [46], [40]. The following texts on visible difference were fundamental for my research (I list them in chronological order): [27], [11], [47], [44], [2], [12], [16], [24]. On facial transplantation, from the perspective of a world-renowned surgeon (who operated on Connie Culp, the first US recipient of a face transplant), see [42]. Three important online resources are: the blog of the project “Effaced from History: Facial Difference and its Impact from Antiquity to the Present Day” (effacedblog.wordpress.com, 2015-2018), led by Patricia Skinner and Emily Cock, with Suzanne Biernoff among its members; the Birkbeck Centre for Medical Humanities (bbk.ac.uk/research/centres/birkbeck-centre-for-medical-and-health-humanities), founded in 2014 at the University of London and co-directed

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by Biernoff and Grace Haldon; the websites of the two face-focused projects coordinated by Fay Bound Alberti (aboutface.uk, 2019-2023; interface.org.uk, 2023-). I am particularly indebted also to a journalistic text by Antonio Casilli on pornography [6] which introduced me to Deleuze and Guattari's *visagéité* ahead of time (the text is from 2000), and Julia Kristeva's work on "the severed head" [26], which represented a further, lateral gateway to the study of "disfigurement".

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