

# THE NOSE OF PINOCCHIO: A SEMIOTICS OF FACIAL MYTHS<sup>1</sup>

MASSIMO LEONE

## Introduction: The Facial Myth of Pinocchio

What remains? Oh, yes — the face itself,  
gasping / For recognition, that coherent form in  
the mire / Of physiological confusions — all  
these odds & ends / Drawn together on the  
page, seeking corporeal unity.  
(Naiden 1971)

*Le avventure di Pinocchio. Storia di un burattino* [“The Adventures of Pinocchio. Tale of a Puppet”], by Carlo Lorenzini, aka Carlo Collodi, is famous worldwide. Pinocchio’s best-known feature is his nose, which stretches out when he tells lies. This appears in chapter XVII of *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Collodi wrote often on faces, noses, and masks. In 1881, he published a collection of articles he had written for Italian journals. The collection was entitled *Occhi e nasi*, “eyes and noses”. In another collection, *Note gaie*, “joyous notes”, edited posthumously by Giuseppe Rigutini in 1892, Collodi writes:

I believe and I have always believed that *the mask* is the perfection of the human race. Perhaps Buffon does not think like me, but his *Natural history* is quite obsolete, especially after the marvelous progresses recently made by the sciences in general, and in particular as regards *papier-mâché* noses.  
(Collodi 1892: 266; trans. mine)

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay 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). A first version of this essay was presented on December 1, 2021, at the seminar of CRASSH at the University Cambridge; a second version was delivered on May 20, 2022, at the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes Conference at Duke University. Thanks to all those who contributed comments and reactions to these first drafts.

The subsequent paragraphs propose an ironic history of the ancient mask. Collodi then refers to the present:

In these days, someone else has engaged in solving a very serious and very profound problem: the problem of knowing whether a free population might be allowed to add to its own nose another papier-mâché nose, and to hide *the mirror of the soul* (a poetical sentence to ennoble the word *muzzle*) with a conspicuously appearing *morettina*.

(*Ibidem*: 267; trans. mine)

“Morettina” is an Italian word for the typical Venetian mask, which covers the nose and the upper part of the face. It was so called because it was originally dark, usually black. Collodi then concludes:

As far as I am concerned, so as not to rack my brain with problems, I declare right now that the first right of a free citizen is that of being able to don a mask in all season, and even in the season of political elections; and if voters will complain, too bad for them; this is the world now, and fortunately I was not the one who made it.

(*Ibidem*, trans. mine)

Collodi did not make the world, but he made Pinocchio. He made it (him) with a peculiar feature: a growing nose. In Pinocchio, however, the relation between nose and lying is not straightforward. The nose starts growing when it is first carved by Geppetto, before Pinocchio lies:

After the eyes, it was time to carve the nose, which began to stretch as soon as finished. It began to grow and grow and grow till it became so long, it seemed endless. Poor Geppetto kept cutting it and cutting it, but the more he cut, the longer grew that impertinent nose. In despair he let it alone.

(Collodi 1881, chapter 3; trans. Mary Alice Murray, 1892)

The nose then appears a couple of times in the story. It stretches out when Pinocchio lies. After the boy’s struggling and weeping over his deformed nose, the Blue Fairy summons woodpeckers to peck it back to normal. The stretching nose has been variously interpreted. There are theological, esoteric, even freemason interpretations of Pinocchio. A recent book by Giorgio Agamben is on Pinocchio (2021). The Italian philosopher too underlines the inconsistent relation between stretching nose and lying:

It is important not to forget that the growth of the nose is not necessarily a symptom of lies. When the demiurge, after having made the “big wooden eyes” [“occhiacci di legno”], fabricates the nose, “as soon as it was made,

it started to grow; and grew and grew and grew, until it became an endless nose”.

(Agamben 2021: 128-9; trans. mine)

According to Agamben, “the nose is the expression of the incorrigible, picaresque insolence of Pinocchio, and only secondarily of his equally picaresque knavery” (*ibidem*; trans. mine). In the Italian philosopher’s interpretation, Pinocchio’s lying is physiological, linked to his indeterminable character and to the vagueness of an existence that, therefore, can only be indefectibly failed. The endless nose of Pinocchio is his truth. Agamben concludes:

Truth is not an axiom established once for all: it grows and dwindles ‘at a glance’, together with life, to the point of becoming more and more cumbersome and difficult for those who adhere to it without reservation — like the nose of Pinocchio, indeed.

(*Ibidem*: 130; trans. mine)

Agamben certainly refers to Italo Calvino’s interpretation of Pinocchio as the only true picaresque character in Italian literature. But he, Agamben, also reads Pinocchio’s nose as the element of a moral allegory. So does also the US philosopher Martin W. Clancy, in the 2015 article for the *New Yorker* “What the Original Pinocchio Really Says about Lying?”. In his interpretation of Pinocchio’s nose, Clancy refers to Rousseau as regards the boy’s innate insolence, and to German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s notion of “living truth” as regards Pinocchio’s lying:

Bonhoeffer argues that it is naive and misleading, perhaps even dangerous to suppose that the literal truth always or even typically conveys what we mean when we talk about telling the truth. Of course, we often tell a straightforward lie, and for morally blameworthy reasons. But we also often make statements that are not literally true — that are in fact literal lies — while conveying a deeper truth that an honest statement of the facts could not communicate.

(Clancy 2015: online)

## Myths and lies

Clancy is also the editor of an OUP collection of essays entitled *The Philosophy of Deception* (2009). It includes a chapter by Paul Eckman on “Lie Catching and Micro-Expressions”. Eckman became world-famous thanks to the fact that the face of human beings does not behave like the

face of Pinocchio. When humans lie, their noses do not grow. Yet Eckman became famous also because he argues that human faces are not entirely different from Pinocchio's. When humans lie, Eckman claims, something in their face often changes. The change is involuntary and uncontrollable. Therefore, it can be read as a sign of lying. But Eckman also stresses that this sign is no univocal. Not all involuntary facial micro-expressions are symptoms of lying, and not all lies give rise to involuntary micro-expressions. Eckman's method to read them has been successfully marketed to privates and institutions, including intelligence services. The US TV series *Lie to me* is inspired by his method.

Yet Eckman's research is also philosophical. Like Agamben's and Clancy's commentaries on Pinocchio, it bears on the philosophy of lying. More specifically, it enquires into the place of lying in the evolution of the human species. Why are human faces able to simulate inner states? Why are they able to dissimulate them? And why are such simulation and dissimulation almost always imperfect? What determines the degrees of such (im)perfection? And how was all that adaptive throughout evolution? Are human faces like masks? Is their correspondence with the inside always partial?

Umberto Eco, herald of Italian semiotics, defines it as "the discipline that studies everything that can be used to lie" (1975: 18). Mirrors, for instance, he claims in an essay (1985), are not semiotic objects, because they never lie. If they do, like those that make people look slimmer, they do so always according to the same rule. In the abovementioned note, Collodi refers to the face as to the "mirror of the soul". It is a very old metaphor. The reference is, nevertheless, ironic. Whereas mirrors cannot lie, faces can. Collodi even argues that the truth of faces is in their masks. Since masks do not change, the lie they tell turns into a sort of truth. According to Eco's definition, masks are semiotic objects. Differently from mirrors, they can be used to lie. They can be donned to make a face appear what is not. Yet they usually do so according to a code. That is why, paradoxically, they can be more reassuring than faces. They are easier to decode. Are faces semiotic objects too?

Yes and no. They can be used to lie, for sure. Yet, as Eckman points out, when the face works as a mask, such mask is always imperfect. Something, in it, cannot be completely controlled. The reason is simple. Unlike the mask, the face is a living biological device. It is not made of wood, like Pinocchio, but of living flesh. Professionals of facial simulation, like actors and actresses, and of facial dissimulation, like poker masters, perfect the control of their faces. Yet this control is always

imperfect. There is no one to one correspondence between how we want our face to look and how it does look. There cannot be.

The reason might lie in the natural evolution of the human face. Before being a visage, the human face was probably just a head. It was a part of the body in quick contact with the brain through sensorial organs. They were, and still are, concentrated on the surface of our head: eyes, ears, mouth, nose, a quite sensitive part of the skin. Touch is the only sense whose biological device is distributed along the human body, coextensive with the skin. The other organs are conveniently placed close to the brain, in a narrow area that is easy to protect. Yet this concentration impacts on self-perception. We can touch our skin and taste our mouth; under certain conditions we can smell our nostrils and hear the sounds that our ears produce (not a good sign); but there is no way to see our own eyes. Moreover, there is no way to see our own face. The most we perceive of it is the contour of our eyes, the tip of our nose, the tip of our tongue and lips, if we try.

Hence, the face is a non-cybernetic device. The hand is. We can look at our hands and adjust them to the environment. But the adjustment of the face to the world is always indirect. It must rely on 1) a very limited proprioception: I think that my face is looking the way I think, but I might be wrong; in a selfie we never look as we thought we would while taking it; 2) the face of the other; we know what face we have, what face we make, and what face we are, through observing the reactions to it on other people's faces; yet that does not solve the riddle but complicates it: does my interlocutor reliably mirror my face? Is that just a simulation, a dissimulation? If I am not sure about the face I show, how can I be sure about other people showing their faces to mine?

The face is, therefore, a Bakhtinian device. It is always dialogical. Even alone in the desert, my face is quintessentially for another face. Yet this other face this face of mine is for is always a mystery. As it was stated before, there is no complete human decoding of the face. That is a limit, but also a guarantee. Emanuel Lévinas famously founded his ethics on the visage. Since it cannot be completely decoded, it cannot be completely encoded either. It is a place of uncertainty, but also of freedom. It intrinsically reminds me that the other is not another 'me' but another 'I'. The other is not an object but a subject, whose face is unpredictable. Subsequent philosophers sought to expand the principle. Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Haraway, Coccia: progressively we realize that other living beings also have a face, and not only a muzzle. Progressively we also realize that our face too is a muzzle, as Collodi ironically thought, a natural muzzle beneath a cultural mask that we call our face. Anthropology

joins philosophy in showing the limits of the face. In some cultures, the Tuaregs for instance, veiling the face is the norm, unveiling it the exception.

### **The face from biological to mythical device**

The non-cybernetic nature of the face (its invisibility, its unpredictability) is probably a social outcome of natural evolution. In the beginning, there was, maybe, just a head. A head with a muzzle. Yet something at some stage changed. Seven million years ago, with Sahelanthropus, as some scholars claim, or about twelve million years ago, with Danuvius Guggenmosi, as other scholars claim, our biological ancestors began to turn bipedal and to look not downwards but straight ahead and even upwards. Morphological alterations of the human skeleton ensued. They included changes to the arrangement and size of the bones of the foot, hip size and shape, knee size, leg length, and the shape and orientation of the vertebral column. The erect position of the head liberated the prominent supraorbital ridges and their strong muscular attachments from the task of sustaining the head. Bipedalism made our heads lighter and our faces more motile and exposed to the faces of other members of the species. Gravity started to exert its force not perpendicular but parallel to our faces. Muscles of the forehead that were theretofore used to sustain the skull adapted to other functions, like frowning. As soon as we stood up, we started to frown.

The social consequences of a face liberated from gravity were huge. The face ceased to be just the part of the head where sensorial organs concentrate. It ceased to be just a muzzle. It became, instead, the primary affordance of life. Our mating position changed. Maybe that's when we started to kiss. Human beings became very skilled at spotting faces in the environment. Seeing faces meant seeing where other living beings and their sensorial organs were. It was important to prey on them, and not to be preyed on by them. The right fusiform area of the human brain became specifically devoted to perceiving faces in the environment. This function is so deep-seated that we are doomed to see faces even if they cannot possibly be there. We see faces in clouds, in rocks. As soon as a visual pattern looks like a face, we recognize it as such. It is pareidolia. Sometimes it can be pathological, like in the Charles Bonnet syndrome or as an effect of LSD. Yet pareidolia exists because it has been adaptive. Our ancestors were better be mistaken in seeing the face of a predator / of a prey that was not there than in not seeing one that was. Seeing faces became crucial for survival.

It also became crucial for interaction among members of the species. Language and face probably coevolved. Together, they gave rise to a fundamental watershed. Humans started to unsee the faces of other animals as faces. They started to see them as muzzles. They also started to differentiate faces and muzzles in human languages. A face is a head affordance one can have social intercourse with; a muzzle is a head affordance to avoid, or to eat, or to enslave. A face is also a mouth. Yet it is mainly a linguistic mouth. It is a mouth that speaks and does not bite. It is a mouth that kisses. It might eat, but only muzzles, not other faces. Seeing other animals as muzzles and not as faces allowed us to eat them, and not to eat each other; it still does (unfortunately for the poor ‘muzzles’ around us (vegetarian personal comment)).

### **The myth of the face *versus* the myth of the muzzle**

A face is also a mouth, and a nose, but it is predominantly two eyes. What humans recognize as face in the face of other humans is exactly that part of it that can in turn recognize their own face as such. An encounter between faces is an encounter between gazes. All Indo-European languages underline the visual definition of the face as visage. Most non-Indo-European languages do so too. When faces are not conceived as visages, they start to be considered as muzzles. When muzzles are considered as faces, it is because they are considered as visages. Pets have faces, not only muzzles, because we see their visages and we think they see ours. Derrida realized it, facing naked his naked cat. Humanizing entails *en-visaging*. Yet the opposite is true too. De-humanizing entails de-facing. The Nazis represented Jews as animals with monstrous muzzles, as defaced animals. Deleuze and Guattari stressed it: the visage is also a machine of normalization; a machine of ‘*visageité*’. It is the primary interface of social acceptability / unacceptability, inclusion / exclusion. The inclusivity of a society is also facial: to what extent are its members ready to recognize the faces of others as visages, and not as simple faces, or even as muzzles? In racist societies, a ‘wrong’ pigmentation is sufficient to turn a face into a muzzle. But on the opposite, the machine of *visageité* can be used to attribute a face to faceless and even to inorganic objects, in design, for instance.

### **Myths of Facial Representations**

We can feel our absent face, we can guess it from the faces of others, but we can also make it present through re-presentations. Mirrors are a recent

invention of the humankind. For a very long time, faces could be reflected only into opaquing surfaces, such as water, or metal. Visual representations of faces are older than mirrors, yet they are not the oldest representations. Bataille speculated that, in cave painting, representing the face was a taboo (1955). That is difficult to ascertain. Yet the Greek myth of painting associates representing faces with both death and love. Pliny the Elder tells the story in the *Natural History*. A potter's daughter was in distress. Her lover was leaving for the war. The night before, the two were in the same room, lit by a lamp. The girl took a chalk and outlined the shadow of the boy's profile on the wall. According to the myth, that was the first portrait. It was a profile portrait. It was modelled after a shadow. It was a gesture of both fear and love. The face might soon be gone. The portrait is meant to stay, in remembrance.

The face is a melting pot of questions. No discipline alone can address them all. In my ERC project (FACETS), I concentrate on the digital shift. The face too goes digital. In representations: we can now capture, store, modify, assemble, and display images of faces with multiple devices. Digital images of faces can be post-produced in unprecedented ways. Deepfakes are just at their beginning. In interactions, we do not meet faces; we meet their digital images; the pandemic has accentuated this trend. Furthermore, our faces are increasingly seen by non-human agents, endowed with artificial intelligence; facial recognition is rampant. On the other hand, we see an increasing number of fictional digital faces; in ultrarealistic videogames; or in robotics. The uncanny valley gets smaller and smaller. We also interact with machine-made digital faces, made by General Adversarial Networks (GANs). No method seems to work in debunking them. Finally, the face goes digital in proprioception too, through a variety of digital 'face enhancements': epidermal electronics; under-skin chips; cyber-glasses; and transhuman devices. We can now see our own face in deepfake virtual reality experiments and interact with it.

Yet, as the popular opinion and the press are awed by all this novelty, we scholars should express doubt; and in some cases, play the devil's advocate. Is 'the digital' really changing the face? Is this change radical? Is it so different from past changes? Are we not, perhaps, hypnotized by the present? Today it is hard to believe it, but smiling faces are not so old. According to some scholars, they are a product of modern dentistry. Before the 18<sup>th</sup> century, smiling was frowned upon in most circumstances. It was deemed as undignified. It would show rotten teeth. The birth of the smiling face in 18<sup>th</sup>-century post-revolutionary Paris was also a revolution; yet it was not digital at all. Is 'the digital' changing our faces as deeply as modern dentistry? And are deepfakes so different from the countless



forgeries and trompe-l'oeil of art history? Is a selfie so incomparable with a portrait, or with a mirror? And aren't GAN images just a secular version of *acheiropoietai* images, like the holy shroud? What about automatic face recognition, is it not just a version of the old panopticon? These are just some of the questions to be discussed.

### **New facial myths in the Anthropocene**

Between June 19 and September 27, 2020, the Carré d'Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, in Nîmes, France, proposed an exhibition entitled *Faces*, with the subtitle *The Time of the Other*.<sup>2</sup> The human face was thematized through the presentation of works by several contemporary artists, ranging from Christian Boltanski to Sophie Calle, from Thomas Ruff to Ugo Rondinone. Like many exhibitions in the same period around the world, this one too was intended as a reaction, through the museum, to the confinement and masking caused by the pandemic:

In these times of confinement where anyone could seem to be a threat and where we advance masked, this exhibition made up largely of works from the collection leads us to look at the other.

The poster for the Nîmes exhibition contained an image from a video installation by African American artist Martine Syms, whose work often focuses on the face as a site of identity and conflict in US society. The exhibition was obviously influenced or even motivated by the urgency to reflect on a very quotidian yet mysterious object, namely the face, after the lockdowns caused by the spread of the COVID-19 virus. During the pandemic, in fact, the anthropological status and deep semiotic functioning of the face was challenged from several perspectives: the difficulty or even the impossibility of meeting the other face to face; the imposition of the mask; the forced digitization of the face in professional, social, and intimate life. All these dynamics imposed a rapid and pressing reconsideration of what was previously consubstantially and literally naturalized as being “in front of everyone's eyes”, that is, the face. The exhibition in Nîmes chose as its motto a sentence from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher of the face par excellence, the already mentioned Emmanuel Levinas, and precisely a passage from the work *Ethics and Infinity*, resulting from of a series of interviews with Levinas conducted by the

---

<sup>2</sup> A description can be found on the web page <https://www.carreartmusee.com/fr/expositions/des-visages-164> (last accessed on January 6, 2022).

French philosopher Philippe Nemo and published in a paperback collection by Fayard in 1982, since translated into some fifteen languages. Levinas's sentence, which was the main theme of the exhibition in Nîmes, read as follows:

The best way to meet someone is not to notice the color of their eyes! When you observe the color of your eyes, you are not in a social relationship with another person. The relationship with the face can certainly be dominated by perception, but what is specifically face is that which is not reduced to it.

The quote is particularly relevant in two ways. On the one hand, on the surface, it is both a metaphorical and literal nod to the political question of the face and its pigmentations, emphasized, moreover, by the choice of Martine Syms' image in the poster: almost at the same time as the world was partially covering the faces of men and women in an attempt to hinder the spread of the virus, a movement of opinion escalated globally, propelled by the violent death of African-American citizen George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer. The movement thematized the social and political role of skin color, but at the same time it focused on the face — and the mouth, in particular — as a channel for breathing, suffocated by police brutality. The two social circumstances, both focused on the face and especially the mouth, have since often intersected in public discourse, for example in the exhibition at the Carré d'Art.

On the other hand, Levinas' phrase has revealed another, deeper relevance, which could be described as the "ethical phenomenology of the face". In the typical style of the Franco-Lithuanian thinker, the quotation seems to describe what happened, in human perception, when the face of the other was masked to protect it from contagion, or to protect others from its contagion: the nose and mouth being covered, as well as most of the lower part of the face, what came to the forefront in the masked-face-to-masked-face encounter was precisely the face's upper part, that of the eyes. With an anatomy detailed by the forced circumstances of the phenomenology of the emergency and, hence, the attribution of a brand new meaning to both their form and function. Individual psychology, but also anthropological cultures of the face, can contribute to making this visual exaltation of the eyes in the masked face particularly striking, or even embarrassing, for example in individuals or in whole societies that talk to each other while looking not into the eyes but towards the mouth or

the body. In this case, looking into someone's eyes has negative connotations, related, for example, to defiance.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the differences of a cognitive, psychological, social, cultural, and contextual nature, which make the occultation of the mouth detrimental to communication, the mask generally hinders the ocular, phenomenological, and semiotic relationship to others (Rahne *et al.* 2021). This often leads to a series of rehabilitation micro-tactics that attempt to use other visual elements — from the visible regions of the face, especially the eye region, up to postural, gestural, and contextual cues — to compensate for the lack of visual information caused by the mask.<sup>4</sup>

Levinas's observation quoted by the Nîmes exhibition has, however, a more general meaning: the face is a biological entity and presents itself through a physical morphology, but its phenomenological functioning, as well as the very complex semiotics that derives from it, require that wholeness which the philosopher of *Totality and Infinity* makes a pillar of his ethics. When the face is perceived not in terms of totality but in terms of fragmentation, its ethical value is endangered. This is the case when it is apprehended not as a singularity but as an occurrence, as a 'token' of a 'type', as linguistics would say.

This philosophical and ethical demand is however in tension with a whole series of approaches to faces which, on the contrary, tend to fit them in, to measure them, to categorize them. How can we develop an anatomical study of the face, and make it an object of science, without emphasizing the aspects that several faces have in common in their structure? How can we explore the cognition of the face without trying to standardize the lines of perception? How can we resist the urge to find clues to a typology of personalities? And how can we develop an automatic reading of faces that is not parameterized? The objectification of the face is of crucial importance in all domains of social life, from interpersonal interaction to the recognition of civic identity when protecting

---

<sup>3</sup> See Uono and Hietanen on eastern and western patterns of eye-contact in face-to-face interactions; see Ayneto and Sebastian-Galles (2016) on the psycholinguistics of the preference for the mouth region; see also Imafuku 2019; see Benson and Fletcher-Watson (2011) on eye movements in autism spectrum disorder; Galazka *et al.* (2021) on facial speech processing in children with and without dyslexia.

<sup>4</sup> See Banks 2021 on perceptual adaptation to audiovisual degraded speech; some of these strategies are even being modeled to develop new algorithms and devices of automatic facial recognition devices, since the functioning of the old versions was made difficult by the diffusion of face masks (Ngan, Grother and Hanaoka 2020; Cevikalp, Serhan Yavuz, and Triggs 2021; Li *et al.* 2021; Liu *et al.* 2021; Maafiri and Choudhali 2021; Nassih *et al.* 2021).

territories and their frontiers; yet it is exactly in these domains, and in these occasions of measuring and controlling faces, that their uniqueness is undermined, humiliated, and mortified. The idea of the quantification of faces immediately returns the memory to the harmful tradition of theories of race, so often entangled with the pseudo-scientific prejudices of colonial ethnography and positivist criminology.

Quantitatively classifying faces is essential for various sciences, including the semiotics of the face. This field, as a science, must go beyond an idealistic interpretation of a face's uniqueness. It needs to explore the underlying language and system that generate meaning in and with the face, beyond individual peculiarities. This analysis should be so refined that it either eliminates these singularities or relegates them to more superficial levels of meaning generation, focusing on the accidental materiality or combinatory uniqueness of faces.

### **The foundational myth of facial singularity**

The naturalized American Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran dedicated a short poem to the faces whose conclusion seems to point in the same direction:

I have seen a face with a thousand countenances, and a face that was but a single countenance as if held in a mold.

I have seen a face whose sheen I could look through to the ugliness beneath, and a face whose sheen I had to lift to see how beautiful it was.

I have seen an old face much lined with nothing, and a smooth face in which all things were graven.

I know faces, because I look through the fabric my own eye weaves, and behold the reality beneath.

(Gibran 1918, p. 52)

This poem, as well as the above-mentioned quote from Levinas, seems to indicate that, in the ethical encounter with the other, the appropriation of the other as an object, and, thus, the violence towards his/her subjectivity, often involves practices that deny the phenomenological totality of the face, for example when one focuses on the anatomical details of the other's face, especially if they are not grasped in their singularity but with a concern for categorization. The face of another, then, is no longer the surface of a singularity, but the beginning of a classification, where the other is appropriated as an object as it is categorized.

The biological and anthropological inheritance of singularity in the human face is such that any classification operation can constitute a kind of threat to this very inheritance. Sometimes, in life, our face is compared

to someone else's, and judged to be similar. The fact that we are told that we look like a famous and handsome actor may even flatter us, but the suggestion that our face is an exact copy of another face, especially if it is an anonymous one, may on the contrary hurt us, or even worry us, especially if the semiotic context requires, an exaltation of singularity, as in any loving interaction, telling one's lover that his or her face looks exactly like that of a well-known actor or actress will not be received positively, since any discourse of comparison or classification of the face potentially undermines its singularity, or at least the social discourse that detects it.

A semio-ethics of the face, inspired by Levinas, must then articulate the system of perceptual, cognitive, and material operations that challenge the face's singularity and its reception by others. This articulation must also single out the operations that, on the contrary, tend to exalt the singularity of the face in the phenomenology of its interactions. What must result from it is a kind of reasoning, both semiotic and ethical, about the face, about everything that can give rise to its homogenization or, on the contrary, can determine its collapse into ever deeper layers of indistinction. Basically, to study the semiotics of the face is to study one of the most accomplished human attempts to emerge from the anonymity of nature by and through language, through the institution of the singularity of one's own face and that of others. Several phenomenologies of uniformity can undermine this project of *anthropopoiesis*, as different 'ethics of the face' can either espouse an ideology of distinction or work towards the depersonalization of the individual. In any case, no human agent, no society, and no cultural project is as threatening to the ethical singularity of the face as nature itself. It is essentially against nature, in fact, that cultures try to assert the particularities of their faces. Nothing reveals the essentially 'prosopoclastic' character of nature better than natural disasters.

### **Myths of facial destitution**

In 2004, a large part of the Indian Ocean coastline was devastated by a tsunami that ravaged mostly the poorest villages in the region, causing massacres. In 2008, the Sri Lankan-American poet Indran Amirthanayagam published *The Splintered Face: Tsunami Poems*, in which he tried to elaborate a kind of 'poetic resilience' against several forms of erasure, understood as an operation that aims at eliminating the human face or reducing it. The tsunami, in fact, annihilated entire stretches of coastline, but above all it erased faces, causing thousands of nameless deaths. One of

the central poems of the collection is entitled, quite simply, “Face”; it opens with the following lines:

Imagine half your face / rubbed out yet / you are suited up / and walking /  
to the office. // How will your mates / greet you? / with heavy hearts, /  
flowers, / rosary beads? // How shall we greet / the orphan boy, / the  
husband whose hand / slipped, children / and wife swept away? // How to  
greet / our new years / and our birthdays? / Shall we always / light a  
candle? // Do we remember / that time erases / the shore, grass / grows,  
bread's / modified?

(Amirthanayagam 2008: digital edition)

And again, near the conclusion of the poem:

I do not know / how to walk upon the beach, / how to lift corpse / after  
corpse / until I am exhausted, // how to stop the tears / when half my face /  
has been rubbed out / beyond / the railroad tracks // and this anaesthetic, /  
this calypso come / to the last verse. / What shall we write / in the sand?

(*Ibidem*: digital edition)

Natural disasters, as well as those that humans inflict upon each other in the mutual attempt to erase the faces of their enemies — a project that reaches its climax in genocides, for example in the Shoah, which was the basis of Levinas’ philosophical experience — are essentially massive erasures of faces. Even the pandemic of COVID-19, which has ravaged the entire planet, consists not only in the drama of the erasure of the faces of the living under the masks, but also in the tragedy of the erasure of the faces of those dying under the oxygen masks, in the anonymity of the mass graves, and in that terrible image, which no one can forget, of the coffins leaving Bergamo on a line of trucks.

A semio-ethics of the face must, therefore, consider the polarization between semiotic conditions that foster the discursive illusion of the face’s singularity and those conditions and operations that diminish this singularity, causing it to fade into indistinction. This semio-ethics, both in its general aims and in specific cases, such as the partial erasure of the face under medical masks, must always consider its broader ideological presuppositions. While the effort to elevate the face as a symbol of singularity is widespread, it is rooted in anthropological, cultural, and historical contexts.

On the one hand, there are cultures, increasingly in the minority in modernity, where the primary function of the face is not that of being a perimeter of singularity; on the other hand, particularly in the context of a reflection on the human face in the era of the Anthropocene, we must not

forget that the face is an inherently anthropocentric affordance. For the phenomenology of the human face is only possible if that of the non-human one is simultaneously erased. The semiotics of the epiphany of the face, in fact, takes its meaning by contrast and by opposition to operations of occultation, which can assume multiple forms and dynamics, while being essentially reduced to two phenomenological categories: on the one hand, the figurative compression of the singular face, namely the mask; on the other hand, the plastic repression of the singular face, namely the veil. It is necessary to deconstruct and reconstruct the common meaning of these two objects that obscure the face — the mask and the veil — precisely to transform them into categories of the ethics of the face and to allow their heuristic use in the broadest sense.

### **Myths of human faciality**

The already mentioned Deleuze and Guattari tried to grasp the ultimate principle of the phenomenology of the face as *visageité*, identifying it essentially in an original plastic structure composed of a pattern of protruding openings from an indistinct background, as a surface that gains depth inwards and outwards by virtue of the three holes — the main one of the mouth and the two superimposed holes of the eyes — that appear in it and perforate it. On the one hand, this minimal *Gestalt* described by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* coincides in some way with the plastic structure that the skull leaves behind after the decomposition of the face, as if it were a kind of plastic shadow that retains its essential size and angularities, but not the singular features brought out by the muscles, tendons, and other more perishable facial tissues. On the other hand, this structure captures some basic dynamics of face perception, manifested, for instance, in pareidolia: whenever, in the surrounding perceptual space, one detects this visual plastic configuration composed of two smaller holes superimposed on a larger one in a symmetrical position with respect to the former, one is led to see a face, or at least a foreshadow of it.

Deleuze and Guattari, however, went beyond this germinal phenomenology of the face, claiming to link it to a theological consideration: if we see singularity in the face, it is because, for centuries, we have cultivated the idea of an incarnate god manifesting himself essentially as a face. Both philosophers place the fault line where the idea of the face is generated at the divide between the human and the divine, formulating the suspicion of its Christocentric character. Levinas, for his part, had located this fault between the human and the human, in that face-to-face intercourse which, in conditions of freedom, guarantees otherness. Deleuze and Guattari

deconstructed this Levinasian in-between, judging it as linked to a Christological prejudice, but they did not escape another blind spot, on which Derrida first, and then especially Donna Haraway, tried to throw the light of an alternative reflection, placing this fault elsewhere, not between the human and the human, and not between the human and the divine, but rather between the animal that considers itself as human — and, thus, as endowed with a face — and the animal that, provided with another access to cognition, undergoes this definition, finding itself, hence, with a non-face, with a muzzle.

The myth that defines the human approach to the face is therefore not that of the incarnation of Christ but that of the sacrifice of Isaac: the divinity asks the human to sacrifice his offspring, whose face is precisely blindfolded so that he cannot see the knife that will sacrifice him, but also so that the son's face, devoid of eyes, appears as a non-face; however, it is at the very moment of the sacrifice that the son's face is exchanged for the ram's face, in a primordial semiotic institution that saves the former as a face and condemns the latter as a muzzle, as a non-face to be sacrificed.

### **Conclusions: plea for a *Prosopocene***

The need to hide our face because of the pandemic shocked us. Especially in the West, the face is a rampart of singularity. The causes of the pandemic have not yet been precisely determined, but a hypothesis shared by several renowned scientists explains it as an effect of what could be called the excesses of the Anthropocene. By exceeding the anthropization of the planet, humans have upset the ecological balance between themselves, other animal species, and the virus. By multiplying our prey among non-human animals, we have become prey to their predators, i.e., their viruses. We are, in a way, replacing other animals as targets of viruses. A pandemic probably caused by anthropocentrism has thus forced us to renounce, at least temporarily, the semiotic device that constructs the human phenomenological distinction, namely, the face. We had to mask ourselves. Medical masks, however, in their design, in their phenomenology, in their functions, and in their semiotics, have implied a fragmentation of the plasticity of the face, and thus the difficulty, or even in some cases the impossibility, of tracing the generative path of faciality back to the social sanction which, in interlocution, recognizes the singularity of the individual.

The pandemic, the result of the violent way in which we humans muzzle other living beings, especially non-human animals, has muzzled us in turn. By dint of denying the faces of other living beings, we ended up



with a denied face. We tried to react by redesigning the masks (Boraey 2021), imagining them transparent, technological, aestheticized by decorations, even by reproducing the underlying faces. Now, after the emergency, when the pandemic has hopefully dissipated, it should be rather by a new design not of the masks but of the faces that we, humans, should react to it. An ancestral lineage of prevarication and suffering has built the human face, which is what it is due to the subjugation of all other living beings, fruit of the negation of the faces of other species. So as to reconstruct our own face after the pandemic, it is not enough to unmask it; the face of the living must be unmasked; it must be revealed through a new facial myth. The true revelation must consist in the reversal of the myth of Isaac: the ram must be unveiled, freed from the blindfold, and above all freed from the muzzle; its face should be recognized, its sacrifice stopped.

The Anthropocene is leading us to increasingly difficult living conditions, has inflicted us with a pandemic, for example. It is time, therefore, and it is urgent, to replace it by a new epoch, which we could call “Prosopocene”, from the Greek name for “face”. In this new era, Isaac, “the one who laughs”, will be the name of every animal, finally freed from a millenary yoke. It is necessary to stop the *prosopophagy* that is devastating the planet, it is necessary to recognize in all living beings the sparks of singularity, and it is also necessary to limit the hold of biotechnological power on the singularities of faces subjected to calculations, measurements, and controls. Let us replace the ram of sacrifice with plants cultivated with dignity, and the machines that erase the singularity of faces with devices that, on the contrary, exalt their uniqueness; this will be a new step towards our own liberation, towards our unveiling as a species that lives not only in the language that is proper to our species and perhaps to it alone, but also in the face through which we look at nature, through which nature looks at us, the face that we give to our machines and that, increasingly, our machines give to us.

### **Bibliographic references**

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2021. *Pinocchio: Le avventure di un burattino doppiamente commentate e tre volte illustrate*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Amirthanayagam, Indran. 2008. *The Splintered Face: Tsunami Poems*. Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose Press.
- Ayneto, Alba and Nuria Sebastian-Galles. 2016. “The Influence of Bilingualism on the Preference for the Mouth Region of Dynamic Faces”, *Developmental Science*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12446>

- Banks, Briony, et al. 2021. "Eye Gaze and Perceptual Adaptation to Audiovisual Degraded Speech", 3432-45. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 64, 9;  
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A677096113/AONE?u=cambuni&sid=blookmark-AONE&xid=4f1ce891>
- Bataille, Georges. 1955. *Lascaux, ou, La naissance de l'art : La peinture préhistorique*. Geneva: Skira.
- Benson, Valerie and Sue Fletcher-Watson. 2011. "Eye Movements in Autism Spectrum Disorder", 709-28. In Liversedge, Simon, Iain Gilchrist, and Stefan Everling, eds. 2011. *The Oxford Handbook of Eye Movements*. Oxford, UK: OUP.
- Boraey, Mohammed A. 2021. "An Analytical Model for the Effective Filtration Efficiency of Single and Multiple Face Masks Considering Leakage", 1-9. *Chaos, Solitons and Fractals*, 152 (111466).
- Cevikalp, Hakan, Hasan Serhan Yavuz, and Bill Triggs. 2021. "Face Recognition Based on Videos by Using Convex Hulls", 4481-94. *IEEE Transactions on Circuits and Systems for Video Technology*, 30, 12 (December); <https://doi.org/10.1109/TCSVT.2019.2926165>
- Clancy, Martin W. 2009. *The Philosophy of Deception*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Clancy, Martin W. 2015. "What the Original Pinocchio Really Says about Lying?", online. *The New Yorker*, February 6; available at <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/original-pinocchio-really-says-lying> [last accessed December 16, 2022]
- Collodi, Carlo (pseudonym of Carlo Lorenzini). 1881. *Occhi e nasi: (ricordi dal vero)*. Florence: F. Paggi.
- Collodi, Carlo (pseudonym of Carlo Lorenzini). 1883. *La storia di un burattino*. Florence: Libreria Editrice Felice Paggi; Engl. trans. *The Story of a Puppet, or, The Adventures of Pinocchio*; translated from the Italian by M.A. Murray. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892.
- Collodi, Carlo (pseudonym of Carlo Lorenzini). 1892. *Note gaie; raccolte e ordinate da Giuseppe Rigutini*. Florence: R. Bemporad & f.
- Eco, Umberto. 1975. *Trattato di semiotica generale*. Milan: Bompiani.
- Eco, Umberto. 1985. *Sugli specchi e altri saggi*. Milan: Bompiani.
- Galazka, Martyna A. et al. 2021. "Facial Speech Processing in Children with and without Dyslexia", 501-24. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 71;  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11881-021-00231-3>
- Gibran, Kahlil. 1918. *The Madman: His Parables and Poems*. New York, NY: A. Knopf.

- Imafuku, Masahiro, et al. 2019. "Demystifying Infant Vocal Imitation: The Roles of Mouth Looking and Speaker's Gaze", *Developmental Science*; <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12825>
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1982. *Éthique et infini*, ed. Philippe Nemo, Paris: Fayard.
- Li, Hong-An et al. 2021. "Facial Image Segmentation Based on Gabor Filter", 1-7. *Mathematical Problems in Engineering*, 2021, 6620742; <https://doi.org/10.1155/2021/6620742>
- Liu, Ping, et al. 2021. "Point Adversarial Self-Mining: A Simple Method for Facial Expression Recognition", 1-12. *IEEE Transactions on Cybernetics*; <https://arxiv.org/abs/2008.11401>
- Maafiri, Ayyad and Khalid Chougali. 2021. "Robust Face Recognition Based on a New Kernel-PCA using RRQR Factorization", 1233-45; *Intelligent Data Analysis*, 25; <https://doi.org/10.3233/IDA-205377>
- Naiden, James. 1971. "The Face", 29-30. *Poetry*, 118, 1. Chicago, IL: Modern Poetry Association.
- Nassih, Bouchra, et al. 2021. "An Efficient Three-Dimensional Face Recognition System Based Random Forest and Geodesic Curves" 1-8. *Computational Geometry: Theory and Applications*, 97, 101758; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comgeo.2021.101758>
- Ngan, Mei, Patrick Grother, and Kayee Hanaoka, eds. 2020. *Ongoing Face Recognition Vendor Test (FRVT) Part 6B: Face Recognition Accuracy with Face Masks Using Post-COVID-19 Algorithms*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce; National Institute of Standards and Technology.
- Rahne, Torsten et al. 2021. "Influence of Surgical and N95 Face Masks on Speech Perception and Listening Effort in Noise", 1-11. *PLoS ONE*, 16, 7 (2021): e0253874; <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-343284/v1>
- Uono, Shota, and Jari K. Hietanen. 2015. "Eye Contact Perception in the West and East: A Cross-Cultural Study", 1-15. *PloS one*, 10, 2; e0118094; <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0118094>