The Aesthetics and Politics of the Face

Module Outline
Dr. Zach Blas
Autumn 2015

ABOUT
The face functions multifariously as a unique nexus between communication and identification, aesthetics and politics. This module explores discourses and genealogies of the face in the 20th and 21st centuries, with an emphasis on art, philosophy, science, and critical theory. A particular focus of the module addresses the face as a site of both liberation and oppression, aesthetic beauty and scientific calculation. We will discuss the face as an ethical demand as well as a boundary between human and nonhuman. Furthermore, we will attend to the ways in which different modes of representation affect the meaning faces signal, by looking at contemporary art works, portraiture, social media profiles, criminal mug shots, and biometric data. Another core focus centers upon aesthetic and political transformations of the face, through examinations of masks, veils, cosmetics, and activism. Throughout the term, our discussions will be inflected by geopolitics, gender, race, class, and disability. We will read works spanning continental and political philosophy, postcolonial theory, women of color feminism, aesthetic theory, and film and media studies. Readings will be engaged with through considerations of artwork by Adrian Piper, Mongrel, Granular Synthesis, Metahaven, Jemima Wyman, Adam Harvey, among others.

SCHEDULE

1  Calculating the Face: Anthropometry, Physiognomy, Phrenology

Art:
Metahaven, Facestate (2011)

Suggested:
2 Philosophies of the Face

3 Cinema and the Face

Film clips to be shown in class:
Lev Kuleshov, the Kuleshov Effect
Carl Dreyer, The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928)
Sergei Eisenstein, The General Line (1929)
Rouben Mamoulian, Queen Christina (1933)
Andy Warhol, Screen Tests (1964 – 66)

4 Faciality and Defacement

Art:
Faceless (2013), exhibition curated by Bogomir Doringer,
http://www.facelessexhibition.net/

Suggested:

5 The Minoritarian Face: Blackface, Gay Face, Making Face

Art:
Karol Radziszewski, Fag Fighters (2007 - ongoing),

Suggested:

6 The Veil

Suggested:
Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled,” A Dying Colonialism (1965), pp. 35 - 67

7 Digital Facial Mediations

Art:

Suggested:
8 **The Forensic Skull**  

Art:  
Thomas Keenan, Kerstin Schroedinger, and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele’s Skull* (2012),  
https://vimeo.com/38440394

9 **Biometric Facial Recognition**  

Art:  

Suggested:  
Philip E. Agre, “Your Face is not a Bar Code: Arguments Against Automatic Face Recognition in Public Places” (2003),  
http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/bar-code.html  

10 **Transformations**  
http://rhizome.org/editorial/2012/oct/15/five-videos-jemima-wymans-shared-face-collective/  
Oliver Sacks, “Face-Blind: Why are some of us terrible at recognizing faces?” *The New Yorker* (2010),  
http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/08/30/face-blind

Art:  
Jemima Wyman, various works, https://jemimawyman.wordpress.com/

Suggested:  