Seeing a Face, Reading a Face, edited by François Soulages, Anikó Ádám and Anikó Radvánszky, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2023.

Bence Matuz[1]

The human face, as a subject of reflection since Antiquity, has raised questions in a wide variety of fields. The face has been in the focus of interest of art, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and numerous other disciplines. *Seeing a Face, Reading a Face* is a collection of scholarly essays that takes a pluridisciplinary approach to the representability of the face in art and literature, while considering the links between the face and subjectivity, and between identity and mutability. In other words, the problem of the face is rooted in the fact that its subject is the most general and the most particular of human qualities at the same time. The face is self-identity and identity in every sense of the word, both as a fundamental element of identity, as a par excellence characteristic of the individual, and as a universal quality that is common to all human beings, given that everyone possesses it. The volume thus focuses on observations of self-identity and variability, and of the general and the particular. These observations cannot be neglected when thinking about art and literature, considering that these, like the face itself, present us with objects that are constantly open to interpretation and that are enigmatic and given at the same time.

This dichotomy also characterises the structure of the volume. As its title suggests, *Seeing a Face, Reading a Face* is divided into two sections called "movements". The first examines the face as a visible entity, while the second considers the face as a literary topos, i.e. a text. Consequently, the first part addresses the conditions of the possible representations of the face in visual arts, while the second part contains essays that discuss semiotic and literary issues of this motif. The structure of *Seeing a Face, Reading a Face* thus refers to the dialectic that can be observed between the sensory and the conceptual, similarly to its Hegelian form. Although the essays in this volume do not explicitly refer to the problematics of the face as formulated in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the structure of this collection alone reflects the dialectical

---

[1] Pázmány Péter Catholic University, matuzbence97@gmail.com

movement of the perception of the face. For the face makes the invisible visible through the concrete features of a given mimic, in other words, the psychological functioning and subjectivity that cannot be reduced to precise definitions.

The pluridisciplinary approach of *Seeing a Face, Reading a Face* explores the theme of the face in all its complexity. The first movement of the volume analyses the representations of the face in twelve essays, each approaching it from a different perspective: from aspects of philosophy, visual arts, film aesthetics, informatics and plastic surgery – among others. Each of these areas enables the texts to develop a particular vision, capable of analysing the impact of the current state of the discipline on the face as an object of artistic representation. The second movement concerns the approaches to the representation of the face in literature, stemming, among others, from the relationship of literary texts to fine arts, philosophy, psychology, or stylistic procedures. The major methodological difference between the two movements of the volume, however, is that the second movement is more reflective in its interpretation of the face than the first. The second part examines the face mainly as an allegory of personality and subjectivity, while the first part deals with representations in the visual arts and considers the face as a somewhat more direct expression of personality, largely due to its thematic approach, which is closer to sensuality. In other words, the analyses of the first section put greater emphasis on the materiality of the face, while those of the second present the face as allegory.

Along with the differences, there are also similarities between the methodologies of the two movements. The methods used are, in the majority of the writings, organised around common concepts, namely: identity and variability. In examining the representational possibilities of the face, the researchers and the works analysed encounter the difficulties of objectifying and articulating a fundamentally intangible human characteristic. The central question in most of the texts is how to represent what is, on the one hand, the same in each individual and, on the other hand, resistant to all forms of systematisation, and is hence variable.

In the hope of capturing, or at least delineating the face, François Soulages' opening essay offers a fruitful solution to the above-mentioned problems in the form of the concept of *intervisage* (19). The concept accounts for the essentially communal nature of the face, in other words, for the fact that the face exists only in interpersonal relations. "The face," Soulages writes, "is interactive, or rather interpersonal; it is the fruit of interaction between at least two persons." (16) This statement is explicitly or implicitly present throughout the essays in *Seeing a Face,*

Reading a Face, such as in Marie-Gersande Raoult's writing, which explores an important aspect of Claude Cahun's photographic oeuvre. Cahun undertakes a form of artistic self-creation when he finds it necessary to "escape from himself, to make and see himself as ungraspable, and finally to move the self towards other entities, other subjects, other identities, in order to arrive at the ultimate question" (45). In another analysis of Giorgione's painting *Time*, Biagio d'Angelo stresses that "outside of me there is Time, outside of me there is Being, a Being of the Self that allows me, as I know it, to say Self" (58). The photographer Gilles Picarel, when reporting on his project *Resident* [Résidant], also notes that "taking a photograph of another's face evokes a 'creating-together' in the midst of a situation in which everyone is a stranger to the other." (67) In her examination of the projects of the performance artist ORLAN, Sophie Armache Jamoussi points out that the artist who resorts to plastic surgery, by creating his own face as an art object, engages in a programme in which "he speaks from within himself, in fact, of being human: of the other who is at the same time identical to him" (97). The principle of the *intervisage* is predominantly explicit in the first movement of the volume but is nevertheless used in the second movement as well. Some of Anikó Ádám's statements point to certain connections between the notion of the *intervisage* and the mask. "The mask does not hide anything, but – as figure and face – reveals. Its readability, the confident knowledge of the codes it assumes, presupposes the viewer as a reader who is able to see and interpret everything. In this way, meaning is revealed to our eyes." (160) These reflections on the mask are all the more illuminating for the notion of *intervisage* as they explain the literary strategy of Marcel Proust, who, because of his special mental disorder, had difficulty identifying human faces. By developing caricaturistic or abstract masks, the author was able to create and memorise characters despite his condition. Thus, Proust provides striking evidence of the intersubjective nature of the face, which the mask does not obstruct but, on the contrary, can facilitate. In the light of the analyses above, the intersubjective aspect of the face is of particular importance, given that even the most self-centred artistic projects depend on interaction with the community.

Although the concept of *intervisage* allows for an approximate explanation of the face, the volume also thematises the crisis affecting the face. According to François Soulages, the latter derives from the fact that the face, which remains elusive, is characterised first and foremost by its presence, which

is different from, or even contradictory to, representation; we have either an uncommunicative experience of the face or one or more representations of it, knowing that this multiplicity may initially appear to be an easy way forward, but very soon becomes the source of difficulties. For the face is never exhausted in the combination of representations; a possible philosophy of the face is not so much phenomenological as existential. (17)

In analysing this problem, Soulages raises the question of whether art can represent the face without objectifying it. The crisis of objectification is strikingly revealed in Vincent Duché's essay and in the art projects he analyses (*FACES* [2014], *Profil* [2016]). These are based on the use of softwares that can reconstruct the face without the presence of the subject. Duché concludes that "with the emergence of the numerical double, the individual is no longer a constitutive element of their representation, to the extent that they have been completely displaced from the latter" (107). This conclusion thus questions Soulages' thesis that the face presupposes presence in all cases. In this way, a rupture in the sign ["*rupture indicielle*"] (106) is produced, which aggravates the crisis of the face.

In addition to the notions of the *intervisage* and crisis, the notion of mystery is also addressed in the volume. The essays focusing on the indefinability of the face are in a sense the antithesis of the aforementioned crisis, relying on the idea that the elusive nature guarantees the (self-)identity of the individual and subjectivity. In accordance with the highly subjective nature of the face, François Soulages concludes with a prose verse addressed to the human face (22–244). Nevertheless, most of the essays attempt to capture subjectivity in less lyrical terms. In her essay on Emannuel Levinas's thoughts on the face, Anikó Radvánszky starts from the hypothesis that "*the conceptual structure of the idea of the infinite is expressed in the face*" (170, emphasis in original). The face as the infinitely other appears here in its radically original state. In another essay, Ágnes Tóth analyses Maurice Carême's short stories *Medua* and *Nausica* through the Medusa myth. The interpretation of the two works and the myth leads the author to the conclusion that "the mirror-shield held by Perseus represents the distance that makes visible the Other, the other self; the detachable Gorgon head reveals the process leading to the depictable, the transparent" (200–201). The mention of the Other, the necessity of the distance and the decapitation of Medusa suggest an endless search for identity. The decapitation of the "other self" is necessary to get to know and handle it, otherwise the person risks the petrification and the obfuscation of identity. Self-identity, like the face of Medusa, is therefore never fully attainable, and proves to be a mystery par excellence.

Seeing a Face, Reading a Face thus raises meaningful questions about the representation of the face and, through it, identity. The essays evoke reflections that fit into the paradigm of the concepts outlined above: that of the *intervisage* that postulates the face as a node of interpersonal relations; that of the crisis which manifests itself in the displacement of the subject's presence from its representation; and finally, that of the mystery, guaranteed by the highly contradictory nature of the face, in a constant uncertainty between identity and variability. This volume does not undertake to provide a definitive, systematic solution to these questions, but it nevertheless mentions useful concepts for reflections on the representation of the face in art and literature.

Translated by *Petra Zsófia Balássy*