
Face to Face: facial close-ups and joint attention in Science and the Visual Arts

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Abstract: This essay examines the contrasting visions of the expressive powers of the human face—both from neuroscientific approaches rooted in Darwin which argue for a codified system of six basic emotions universally recognized (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, surprise) and from the visual arts of cinema, television and portraiture painting that rely on facial close-ups to represent an emotional fluidity that is always subjective. As a means of reconciling the two approaches, it turns to the current study of infants by developmental psychologists (like Peter Mundy and Daniel Stern) who stress the importance of an infant’s ability to read the mother’s face, which facilitates joint attention, the acquisition of verbal language and social interactions with the world. Although Stern’s imaginative dialogues sound literary and subjective, his description of the infant’s encounter with the mother’s face is actually consistent with the explanation by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999) of how consciousness is first launched in the “core self.” By treating the mother’s face as the crucial object in the infant’s early development and by perceiving this encounter awash in reflective feelings (which Damasio distinguishes from basic emotions shared with other species), he helps explain the dichotomy between the two systems of emotive facial expressions: reading the specific codified emotions (in humans and other species) versus experiencing the flow of (what Damasio calls) “background feelings” that continuously play across the human face. By emphasizing the theories of Béla Balázs and films of Ingmar Bergman and Chick Strand, which literally teach us how to read these background feelings moving across the human face, this essay claims facial close-ups do not distract us from our social circumstances or political action as Walter Benjamin argued. Instead they can have an ideological edge in a wide range of genres as they enable us to see this emotional engagement in joint attention both as a form of interpellation and as a means of survival—not only for infants but for all those engaged with the visual narrative arts.

Keywords: Facial close-ups. Joint attention. Béla Balázs. Daniel Stern. Antonio Damasio

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Cara a cara: *close-ups* faciais e a atenção conjunta na Ciência e nas Artes Visuais.

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Resumo: Este ensaio examina as visões contrastantes dos poderes expressivos da face humana – ambos abordados de forma neurocientífica enraizadas em Darwin, que defendem um sistema codificado de seis emoções básicas universalmente conhecidas (felicidade, tristeza, raiva, medo, desgosto, surpresa) e das artes visuais do cinema, da televisão e da pintura de retratos que dependem de *close-ups* faciais para representar uma fluidez emocional que é sempre subjetiva. Como modo de reconciliar as duas abordagens, ele se volta para o atual estudo de infantes por psicólogos do desenvolvimento (como Peter Mundy e Daniel Stern) que enfatizam a importância da capacidade de uma criança de ler as expressões faciais da mãe, o que facilita a atenção conjunta, a aquisição da linguagem verbal e social e de estabelecer interações sociais com o mundo. Apesar de que os diálogos imaginativos de Stern pareçam literários e subjetivos, sua descrição do encontro da criança com a face da mãe é consistente com a explicação do neurocientista Antonio Damasio (1999), de como a consciência é lançada no “eu central”. Ao tratar o rosto da mãe como objeto crucial nos primeiros desenvolvimentos da criança e por perceber este encontro inundado em sentimentos reflexivos (que Damásio distingue das emoções básicas compartilhadas com outras espécies), ele ajuda a explicar a dicotomia entre os dois sistemas de expressões faciais emotivas: a leitura das emoções codificadas específicas (em humanos e outras espécies) versus experimentar o fluxo (que Damasio chama de) “sentimentos de fundo” que continuamente são jogados no rosto humano. Por enfatizar as teorias de Béla Balázs e filmes de Ingmar Bergman e Chick Strand, que literalmente nos ensinam como ler esses sentimentos de fundo que movem na face humana, este ensaio afirma que os *close-ups* faciais não nos distraem das nossas circunstâncias sociais ou ação política, como argumentou Walter Benjamin. Em vez disso, eles podem ter uma vantagem ideológica em uma ampla gama de gêneros, pois eles nos permitem ver esse envolvimento emocional em atenção conjunta, tanto como uma forma de interpelação como métodos de sobrevivência – não somente para as crianças, mas para todos aqueles envolvidos com a narrativa das artes visuais.

Palavras-chave: *Close-ups* faciais. Atenção conjunta. Béla Balázs. Daniel Stern. Antonio Damasio.

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The Expressive Powers of the Human Face

Facial expression is the most subjective manifestation of man, more subjective even than speech, for vocabulary and grammar are subject to more or less universally valid rules and conventions, while the play of features... is a manifestation not governed by objective canons, even though it is largely a matter of imitation. The most subjective and individual of human manifestations is rendered objective in the close-up.... The expression of the whole face cannot cover up the expression of its details, if these details betray a different, more profound truth. (BALÁZS, 1945)

The evidence suggests that the emotions of all normal members of our species are played out on the same keyboard. The most accessible signs of emotions are candid facial expressions. In preparing *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin circulated a questionnaire to people who interacted with aboriginal populations on five continents.... Darwin summed up the responses: “The same state of mind is expressed throughout the world with remarkable uniformity.” Contemporary research has borne out his conclusion. When the psychologist Paul Ekman began to study emotions in the 1960s, facial expressions were thought to be arbitrary signs that the infant learns when its random grimaces are rewarded and punished. If expressions appeared universal, it was thought, ... no culture was beyond the reach of John Wayne and Charlie Chaplin. Ekman assembled photographs of people expressing six emotions. He showed them to people from many cultures... Everyone recognized happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise. (PINKER, 1997)

How do we reconcile these contrasting visions of the expressive powers of the human face? On the one hand, the “scientific” approach has identified a specific location in the brain that controls facial recognition and a brief list of emotions that generate facial expressions which are universally recognized across diverse cultures. Rooted in Darwin’s narrative of natural selection, this codified system is the basis for security systems relying on facial recognition, for animation software that makes the depiction of the human face more realistic, and for the current on-line popularity of emoji that slightly expand both the emotional and cultural range of the author’s facial expressions. On the other hand, we have all experienced the free play of feelings that moves with great fluidity across the human face, particularly in facial close-ups at the movies or on television. For many, these subtle expressions are the essence of good acting. For Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs (1945) they led him to argue that the human face is the greatest resource for cinematic art and to apply this theory (not to

John Wayne and Charlie Chaplin like Pinker) but to Maria Falconetti in Carl Dreyer's 1928 silent classic, *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*.

In the last years of the silent film we saw... conversations between the facial expressions of two human beings who understood the movements of each others' faces better than each others' words and could perceive shades of meaning too subtle to be conveyed in words.... The silent film...was given the possibility of presenting a passionate life-and-death struggle almost exclusively by close-ups of faces. Dreyer's film *Jeanne d'Arc* provided a convincing example.... Several hundred feet of film show nothing but big close-ups of heads, of faces.... Here no riders gallop, no boxers exchange blows. Fierce passions, thoughts, emotions, convictions battle here, but their struggle is not in space. Nevertheless, this series of duels... in which eyes clash instead of swords, can hold the attention of an audience for ninety minutes without flagging. (BALÁZS, 1945)

Figure 1 –Left: Put emotion under each face: Fearful, Angry, Sad, Happy, Disgusted, Surprise.
Right: Dreyer's *Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*.



Source: Left: Different facial expressions of emotion from the test created by Ekman and Friense [1];
Right: movie frame capture

Should we choose one of these approaches over the other or attempt to reconcile the two? If we choose the latter, then perhaps we can rely on Gerald Edelman's (1987) neuroscientific theory of "neural Darwinism" that assumes new networks of neurons arise in the brain and co-exist with earlier networks performing the same or similar function? Or, perhaps we can find a cinematic model or a neuroscientific or psychological theory that supports such a duality.

On the Cinematic Close-up

No filmmaker of the sound era made a greater use of powerful facial close-up's than Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007), who increasingly relied on huge close-ups as he explicitly taught us viewers how to read the human face. Those demands are strongest in what he called his “chamber works”, films featuring a few characters in a remote setting who are immersed in intense emotional interactions. Relying on the expressive power of the human face that was so crucial in the era of silent cinema, Bergman creates several characters who speak very rarely or who deliberately choose not to speak at all. In *Persona* (1966), Liv Ullmann plays Elisabet Vogler, an actress who goes mute in the middle of a performance of *Electra* and decides not to utter another word. Like Nurse Alma (Bibi Andersson) who has been assigned to accompany her to a remote island, we must learn how to read the actress's facial expressions.

Figure 2 - Two facial close-ups of the nurse and actress from Bergman's *Persona*, first side by side, then fused.



Source: movie frames capture

We get a specific lesson in a scene from Bergman's later film *Cries and Whispers* (1972), when a pair of former lovers look directly into the camera (as if it were a mirror), as the man literally reads the lines on the face of the woman (who is also played by Ullmann). Yet she resists his reading, by accusing him of having projected his own qualities onto her face—the same tactic the Ullmann character used in the “motherhood” sequence in *Persona*, where we hear the painful story of how Elisabet Vogler rejected her son, first as we see expanding facial close-ups of the

actress and then as we hear the exact repetition of the story but this time with expanding facial close-ups of the nurse. Paradoxically, at the same time that Bergman is teaching us how to read the human face objectively, he is also making us recognize the subjectivity of such a reading, a duality that threatens the sanity of the observer. A similar distrust is also aroused in *Hour of the Wolf* (1968), when one of the demonic characters peels off her face, revealing it's merely a rubber mask (a gesture more recently and more repeatedly performed in HBO's successful TV series, *Game of Thrones*); and in *Face to Face* (1976)—a version of Bergman's favorite fairy tale, *Little Red Riding Hood*—where Ullmann plays a psychiatrist having a nervous breakdown who is terrified of her demonic grandmother whom she believes is the ravenous wolf. Despite (or perhaps because) of such ambiguity about the expressive powers of the human face, Bergman claimed his ultimate desire was to make a film based on a single facial close-up, a goal he came close to fulfilling in his short documentary, *Karin's Face* (1984)—a film based on stills from his family album, primarily of his mother Karin.

Figure 3 - Reading the human face in *Cries and Whispers*. Boy reaching up to image of his mother's face in *Persona*.



Source: movie frames capture

In all of these examples, the large facial close-up is somehow linked to Bergman's painful interactions with his mother, who is always depicted (both in his films and his writings) as cold and rejecting. At the 1978 "Bergman and Dreams" conference at Harvard University, Serbian filmmaker Dusan Makavejev claimed the

huge size of Bergman's facial close-ups (particularly of women) positioned us spectators as the powerless fetus, an idea reinforced by Makavejev's own remix of those gigantic expressive faces. The question that remained for me was this: was Bergman representing his experience with his own mother Karin or merely echoing the post-World War II misogynist concept of the "refrigerator mother", whose lack of emotional warmth (like that of Elisabet Vogler) was blamed for causing autism and other childhood disorders. Although this concept was first suggested by Austrian child-psychiatrist Leo Kanner (1904-1981) in his 1943 essay, "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," it was later popularized more widely by self-taught psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim (an Austrian Holocaust survivor) in his 1967 best seller *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*, which compared the plight of autistic children to that of concentration camp inmates with their parents in the role of guards. Or was there a way to resist this twisted conclusion by making the readability of the mother's face a source of survival, particularly for the newborn?

The Mute Dialogue between Mother and Child

A provocative answer is provided by developmental psychologist Daniel Stern (1990), who presents a phenomenological (rather than psychoanalytic) account of an infant's early encounters with his mother's face and explores what's at stake emotionally in the interaction [2]. Although this interaction occurs before the child acquires verbal language, Stern speaks for the infant (whom he calls Joey), presenting the newborn's point of view in a poetic text that expresses his perceptions and feelings. This phenomenological strategy suggests the infant's emotional life and survival actually depend on his ability to read the mother's face. Though, at first, he treats her face as an external object, he gradually realizes he is being transformed by this crucial encounter which will shape his subsequent interactions with the world.

I enter the world of her face. Her face and its features are the sky, the clouds, and the water. Her vitality and spirit are the air and the light. It is usually a riot of light and air at play. But this time when I enter, the world is still and dull. Neither the curving lines nor the rounded volumes are moving. Where

is she? Where has she gone? I am scared. I feel that dullness creeping into me. I search around for a point of life to escape to.

I find it. All her life is concentrated into the softest and hardest points in the world—her eyes.... I stare into their depths. And there I feel running strong the invisible currents of her vitality. They churn up from those depths and tug at me. I call after them to surface, to see her face again, alive. (STERN, 1990, p. 58)

Stern treats mother and child as partners in a dance, a performance that arouses a desire for what developmental psychologists call “joint attention”—our ability “to coordinate our attention with someone else...in order to talk about the same topic, to be able to shift topics, to know when somebody else is attending to something else either mentally or not” (MUNDY, 2013). It’s a “mute dialogue” between two faces, a dialogue worthy of Carl Dreyer’s cinema, as described by Béla Balázs, but emphasizing fusion rather than conflict. According to Stern,

In reaching across to touch him, her smile exerts its natural evocative powers and sets in motion its contagiousness. Her smile triggers a smile in him and breathes a vitality into him. It makes him resonate with the animation she feels and shows. Her joy rises. Her smile pulls it out of him. Then Joey himself fully releases it from inside... He is both responding and identifying now. (STERN, 1990, p. 65)

In contrast to the painful interactions in Bergman’s *Persona* and *Cries and Whispers*, these moments of joint attention—of contagion and alternation, projection and identification—are welcomed rather than feared.

Once a pair of smiles has passed between a mother and a baby of this age, a process has already been set in motion. What happens is this. Joey’s smile and his mother’s are slightly out of phase with each other.... By remaining out of phase they keep restarting the other and prolong the duet.... Such an alternating pattern between mother and baby becomes common after three months. It occurs in vocalizing back and forth as well as in smiling back and forth. It is the baby’s first and principal lesson in turn taking, the cardinal rule for all later discourse between two people. (STERN, 1990, p. 66)

The lack of eye contact in this early stage is one of the first signs of autism, for joint attention prepares the child for all future identifications and interactions with others. Recent research in child development has shown, once a child has mastered joint attention, it’s then time to take the lead—to be the one who initiates the interest in a new object and who makes sure his mother’s eyes will follow. This alternation soon leads to vocalizations that similarly go back and forth and then to

the acquisition of language, which enables him to become more fully immersed in culture. According to Peter Mundy (2013), Director of Educational Research at the MIND Institute in Sacramento:

When babies come into the world they're not able to coordinate their attention with somebody else.... It develops between about 4 months and 24 months of life... First, we learn to follow the gaze and follow the attention of somebody else. That's like learning to comprehend language. But then we start to be creative, we start to generate language and we also start to generate bids to direct the attention of other people. (MUNDY, 2013)

Although Stern's imaginative dialogues sound very literary and subjective, his description of the infant's encounter with the mother's face is actually consistent with the explanation by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999) of how consciousness is first launched in the "core self."

How do we ever begin to be conscious? Specifically, how do we ever have a sense of self in the act of knowing?... This account is a simple narrative without words. It does have characters (the organism, the object). It unfolds in time. And it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning corresponds to the initial state of the organism. The middle is the arrival of the object. The end is made up of reactions that result in a modified state of the organism. (DAMASIO, 1999, p. 168)

By treating the mother's face as the crucial object in the infant's early development and by perceiving this encounter awash in reflective feelings (which Damasio distinguishes from basic emotions shared with other species), he helps explain the dichotomy between the two systems of emotive facial expressions: reading the specific codified emotions (in humans and other species) versus experiencing the flow of (what Damasio calls) "background feelings" that continuously play across the human face. Not restricted to the codified list of six "universal emotions" studied by Darwin and other scientists (fear, anger, sadness, disgust, surprise, and happiness), Damasio's list of reflective "background feelings" expands to include several binaries such as: fatigue/energy, wellness/sickness, tension/relaxation, surging/dragging, stability/instability, balance/imbalance, harmony/discord. Although Damasio (1999, 286-87) acknowledges his conception of background feelings "is similar to the notion of vitality affects" presented by Daniel Stern, we are still left wondering what if the mother (or caretaker) is not available for this interaction or simply is more interested in the world outside. And what, if any,

are the ideological implications of this condition, or of cinematic facial close-ups that capture and convey underlying feelings?

The Ideological Implications of Facial Close-ups

Probably the best answers to these questions concerning ideology were offered by Marxist philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1936), who (unlike Balázs) focused on the impact of the close-up itself rather than its frequent subject, the human face. Linking the cinematic close-up with psychoanalysis, he claimed both turned the invisible into a visual spectacle. Arising around the same historical moment, cinema and psychoanalysis introduced us to unconscious optics and impulses respectively. While both provided new insights and pleasures, they also distracted us from the material conditions of our life. By turning our attention inward, they made us less attentive to the outside world and its discontents and less likely to engage in meaningful political action or even fulfill his famous dictum—the best way to acquire a book is to write it yourself.

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up beyond hope. Then came film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (BENJAMIN, 1936, p. 745-747)

Benjamin concedes that the cinematic close-up enables us to isolate and analyze details “much more precisely and from more points of view than those presented on paintings or the stage,” an ability that promotes “the mutual penetration of art and science.” Yet this interaction still distracts us from political engagement, which he deems more important, particularly since he was writing as a German Jew during the rise of fascism. This reaction may help explain why there was such a leftist backlash against Bergman when he died in 2007, the same year that

Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni also passed. Despite the aesthetic power and formal originality of both filmmakers, whereas Antonioni's films were widely praised for their prescient Marxist insights about global politics, Bergman's were dismissed for their intense yet narrow focus on bourgeois characters trapped within a psychoanalytic framework.

Figure 4 -The final close-up in Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible, Part 1* (1947).



Source: movie frames capture

Yet, it was and still is possible to read cinematic close-ups with an ideological edge within a wide range of popular genres. For example, to watch a woman's face transform into a street map of Manhattan in a sequence from the Busby Berkeley musical *Footlight Parade* (1933), which links this vapid "Broadway baby" not to the work force riding the morning subway but to the fascist elite that pushed her off a trendy high-rise nightclub. Or to trace the transfer of power in Sergei Eisenstein's historical epic, *Ivan the Terrible, Part 1* (1947), from the opening coronation scene that shows the crown being placed on the head of the young Tsar which is turned away from the camera, implying the power resides within the ritual object rather than the man; to the closing sequence featuring one of the most

powerful facial close-ups in cinema, where the Russian masses seeking the Tsar's return are figured as a serpentine line of antlike creatures winding into the fading background while Ivan's enormous crownless head totally dominates the foreground. Or to see a demented noir diva like Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), waiting for her narcissistic close-up which only she deserves because, "We had faces then." Or to rely on the final lingering close-up of London gangster (Bob Hoskins) at the end of John Mackenzie's *The Long Good Friday* (1980) when he is about to be whacked and finally realizes that his opponents are IRA terrorists rather than local mobsters, that this movie is a European political thriller rather than an Anglicized gangster film, and that he has seriously misunderstood the power dynamics both of the genre and of globalism—realizations he conveys solely with facial expressions.

These ideological facial close-ups are not restricted to cinema but also appear on television. Yet the conventions for treating facial close-ups are different within that medium, for actors, journalists and interviewees are all encouraged to look directly into the camera so they can directly address the viewer. During the early days of television, the smaller screen made the reliance on big "talking heads" all the more crucial, enabling them to function like an expanding system of emojis. Increasingly, it has enabled them to be recognized as a reliable source of transmedia information not only in dramas, documentaries, science shows and news but also in commercials and commentary.

The serial structure of television dramas also provides a more expansive narrative field, which makes the emotional transformation of characters more plausible. We can see this effect in a brilliant crime series like David Simon's *The Wire* (2002-2008), which presents not only a systemic study of corruption in the city of Baltimore but also an ensemble of emotionally compelling characters (on both sides of the law) who are struggling to understand the changing urban dynamics and survive. When charismatic drug dealer Stringer Bell (Idris Elba) tries to go legit, despite his intelligence and driving ambition, he is still too naïve to understand the power dynamics driving the so-called legitimate worlds of business, law, and politics.

As in Hoskins's transformative fatal close-up at the end of *The Long Good Friday*, Stringer's last-minute gain in systemic understanding—represented in a stunning close-up that shows an array of thoughts and feelings playing across his face—reconciles him to his premature death. In both cases, this leap in understanding is a fitting tragic payoff for their respective transformations. Yet, *The Wire*'s broader narrative field enables Stringer's death to be merely another stage in the on-going process of social change.

Documentary: The Case of *Soft Fiction* (1979)

Whether viewed in a movie theater or on television, on a computer, ipad or any other electronic device, a number of films reinforce the neuroscientific approach to narrative and its reliance on the facial close-up as a means of conveying emotions and cultural values. This dimension is a particularly valuable resource in documentary—whether of the traditional, ethnographic or experimental variety. An excellent example is Chick Strand's *Soft Fiction* (1979), a short film that documents the empowering qualities of storytelling, particularly for women.

Soft Fiction can be seen as an anthology of excerpts from serial autobiographies, all of which demonstrate how narrative empowers individuals (in general) and women (in particular) to take control over their lives, even in the most dangerous circumstances. It presents six women telling stories, five of which focus on a traumatic situation: an incestuous relationship with one's grandfather; a struggle against addiction—first to a dangerous lover and then to heroin; a gang rape by cowboys at a rodeo; the march to internment in a concentration camp; and a performance of Hayden's *Death and the Maiden*. The film shows how it is possible for these women to reject the role of victim and take control of their own experience through the act of storytelling—even if they are merely performing a story (like the gang rape or encounter with Death) allegedly written by someone else.

By leaving this question open (of who was the woman at the rodeo), Strand encourages us to question the truth value of the entire film and its multiple narrators. This ambiguity brings to mind neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga's (1998) concept of

the “Interpreter,” an individual’s consciousness located in the left hemisphere of the brain, which “constantly establishes a running narrative of our actions, emotions, thoughts, and dreams... and creates our sense of being a whole rational agent.” Though it is not limited to the truth and usually presents us as more powerful than we actually are, his Interpreter “produces the wonderful sensation that our self is in charge of our destiny” (GAZZANIGA, 1998, p. 174-175)—which is precisely the feeling we get in watching *Soft Fiction*.

Thus, one meaning of the provocative title is the softness of the boundary between truth and fiction. We know that Hayden wrote “Death and the Maiden”, yet this narrative is performed by a female singer and by the filmmaker, two women who bring their own emotions and memories to this powerful collaborative performance. And we know that one of the narrators claims the event she is narrating (sex with several cowboys) didn’t actually happen to her; like us, she is merely reading the text. Yet her comic tone and rejection of the role as victim are narrative strategies that are compatible with her disclaimer about authorship. And if she is the author, then it’s also possible that she was a consenting participant in the sex. Her disclaimer also raises the issue of collaboration: to what extent does her empowerment depend on her identification with the spectators of the film as well as with those who “perform” the other tales. Although the other women don’t deny their authorship or the veracity of the remaining narratives, there’s still the possibility that they are all fiction, particularly since these women are all performers—actresses, filmmakers, writers or singers. As in the case of Gazzaniga’s left brain Interpreter, truthfulness seems less important than the narrative function of the tale—the empowering effect of narrating and thereby controlling the traumatic event.

The title *Soft Fiction* also evokes “soft core” porn, a genre related to the tales of incest, sexual addiction, and gang rape and to the many depictions of female nudity. Though it also suggests softness (like weakness and emotionality) is part of the female stereotype, here it is redefined as a positive term, especially in contrast to the hardness of males. In fact, Strand had intended to do a sequel titled *Hard Fiction*

(and had asked my husband to contribute a story) but never got around to making it. Still, her choice of visual style is anything but soft.

Most of these women are presented in huge, stark black and white facial close-ups that frequently capture only part of their face. These shots are intercut with expressive close-ups of their hands. We read these gestures to gauge the truthfulness of the tale, and to establish the tone (or what Damasio calls “background feelings”). As with Bergman’s gigantic close-ups, they put us in the position of the child gazing up at our mother’s face, on the path to joint attention and language acquisition.

Figure 5 -One narrator raises doubts about the rodeo narrative while Beverle Houston trains us how to read the others in Chick Strand’s *Soft Fiction*.



Source: movie frames capture.

Ironically, although the sixth episode seems to be an exception to this reading, it actually gets to its core. As the first story we hear in the film, it trains us how to read the others. As if drawn by a magnetic invisible presence, the camera slowly approaches a woman (film theorist Beverle Houston), wearing a black gown, seated alone in a room, smoking. As she begins to describe a strange experience she recently had at a Pasadena museum, the film cuts to a huge facial close-up that features her eyes and her mouth and that is intercut with close shots of her fingers holding the cigarette. She confides that when she touched the spiral handrail of a staircase at the museum, she suddenly had a strong desire to become that object—that smooth, coiled railing. And she felt that physical wave of desire moving through

her body—she felt it in her cells and in her small parts, until it made her bones go soft.

Hardly traumatic, this story makes it difficult to see her as a victim. Yet it uncannily illustrates Damasio's (1999) description (already quoted above) of the crucial encounter with an object that launches the "core self." And it also helps us understand his distinction between emotions (which are physical and which we humans share with other animals) and feelings (which provide a self-reflexive look at our own emotions and the way our body experiences them). Beverle had told many of her friends about this experience (including me, her collaborator with whom she had written two books and several essays). But only Chick recognized its significance — Beverle's extraordinary ability to describe and interpret her own feelings with such physical and mental precision. And five years later when Beverle was diagnosed with colon cancer, the physical shape of that coiled railing and its spiraling curves took on new meaning. And another five years later when she died of that disease, her story took on even greater significance, now prefiguring the final performance of "Death and the Maiden" and serving as a perfect introduction to those other tales of survival. Did filmmaker Chick Strand know all this? Did her roots in ethnographic filmmaking help her, or her own experience of personal trauma that she never overcame? Did she somehow see or intuit the connections to neuroscience? Probably not, since the film was made long before Damasio published his theories. But Chick Strand instinctively went for these narrative strategies and expressive facial close-ups because she could feel and harness their emotional impact.

Face to Face: from Masks to Mona Lisa

I don't mean to imply that this revelatory reading of the human face began with cinema. It can also be found much earlier in the making of masks throughout many parts of the world and in portraiture painting, two visual media in which it's the

fixed nature of the facial expression that is the source of its power rather than its fluidity as in cinema and television.

With a collection of over a hundred masks on display on the walls of my living room, I often think about their relationship to the facial close-up. Although masks are static, they are usually part of a codified system that either affirms one's membership within a tribal group or sub-culture, or prevents others from recognizing your unique identity, which is more typical of modern masquerades. Because of their frequent association with dance and ritual performance, there is always the potential contrast between the moving body and the static face hidden behind the mask.

With a filmmaker like Bergman, who specializes in the gigantic facial close-up, we see how he can deftly turn these expressive shots into moving masks whose emotional gestures we are eager to read—like the demon in *Hour of the Wolf* removing her rubber face; or the half-masked performers in *The Rite* (1969), who frighten their critical judge to death; or the mute actress listening to music in *Persona*, where the slow, subtle movement of her face is almost imperceptible. By including such images, his films constantly make us wonder what lies beneath the mask. Instead of making us look forward to television or computers, his films make us look backward in time—not to the theater, a medium in which he had a rich career but which has no close-ups—but to painting, and more specifically to portraiture, which is also concerned both with capturing and complicating the unique emotive power of the human face.

In portraiture, we find dynamic moves that enhance the expressive power of the human face, especially in Leonardo DaVinci's intriguing portrait of Mona Lisa, whose emotive ambiguity almost disavows the painting's static nature. His famous portrait owes some of its power to Renaissance diptych painting, which was featured in a 2014 exhibition at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. Titled *Face to Face: Flanders, Florence, and Renaissance Painting*, the show was designed to demonstrate the importance of Flemish portraiture during the Renaissance and its influence on Italian Masters, including DaVinci. The exhibit may leave some of us wondering whether the Renaissance diptych and its legacy are the basis of the

cinematic facial close up—of both its spiritual and secular powers—particularly in a work like Dreyer’s *Passion de Jeanne d’ Arc*.

In her “Introduction” to the catalogue, co-curator Catherine Hess (2012, p. 9) defines the diptych as “two hinged painted panels that could open and close like a book,” a portraiture format that “became a widespread art form in fifteenth-century Flanders”. Often the diptych established a significant connection between two faces, one linked to the world of spirit and the other to the material world of commerce usually evoked in the surrounds. Hess observes: “One panel displayed a religious subject [frequently the Madonna and Child] while the other contained a portrait of the donor who had commissioned the work.” For example, in the diptych of Maarten Nieuwenhove by Hans Memling (1487), we see a three-quarter portrait of a young man praying, as he gazes intently at the Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus in the adjacent panel. Over time, stylistic changes altered the nature of these implied relations, especially as the portraits moved from earlier idealized profiles (considered more modest and therefore more appropriate for female subjects) to the more modern, realistic three-quarter or frontal facial close-ups (whose openness was deemed more suitable for male subjects). Yet, later in Italy in DaVinci’s *Mona Lisa* (1503-16), the secular female subject, whose face is seen in the open three-quarter angle and who is surrounded by a worldly Flemish-style landscape, still retains the captivating spiritual power of the Madonna.

Figure 6–Left: Hans Memling’s Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove, 1487.
Right: Hans Memling’s Christ Blessing, 1481.



Source: Left – Wikimedia Commos [3]. Right – Pinterest Art, Hans Memling [4]

This fusion of the spiritual and material worlds in the face of a single figure can also be found in the most powerful portrait in the Huntington exhibition, Hans Memling’s *Christ Blessing* (1481, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Fig. 6), which contains a frontal facial close-up of Christ staring directly at the viewer. In this “realistic” image, it’s as if the spectator were being drawn into the diptych, where he or she can enjoy an intimate joint attention with Christ, whose visual direct-address guides the viewer’s spiritual development. The interactive power of the image is intensified by having Christ bless the viewer with one hand while resting his other hand on the picture frame, as if transforming it into a window and thereby eliminating the spatial and ontological boundaries between himself (a figurative holy image) and the spectator (a person in the flesh). According to co-curator Paula Nuttall (2012, p. 29), “Confronted with such an image in the intimacy of private prayer, the worshipper could readily imagine him- or herself in the presence of Christ.” Hess claims (2012, p. 10) such images “stressed identification with Christ’s suffering and contemplation of his humanity rather than divinity. To this end, Flemish painters painted his face in close-up and with great realism...to engage the viewer’s empathy and bond with the subject.” Yet, whereas Christ exerts his power as a material presence embodied in the realistic medium of paint, the spectator position

remains a blank virtual space ready to be occupied by one who accepts the role demanded by the painting. In similar paintings, such as Master of Jean Chevrot's *Face of Christ* (1450, New York Morgan Library and Museum, Fig. 7) and William Vrelant's *Salvator Mundi* (1460-70, Los Angeles J. Paul Getty Museum, Fig. 7), Christ's facial close-up is framed by printed text, as if Jesus were compelling the viewer to read the symbolic language of the culture as well as the gestural language of the face.

Figure 7 – Left: Jean Chevrot's *Face of Christ*, 1450;
Right: William Vrelant's *Salvator Mundi* (1460-70)

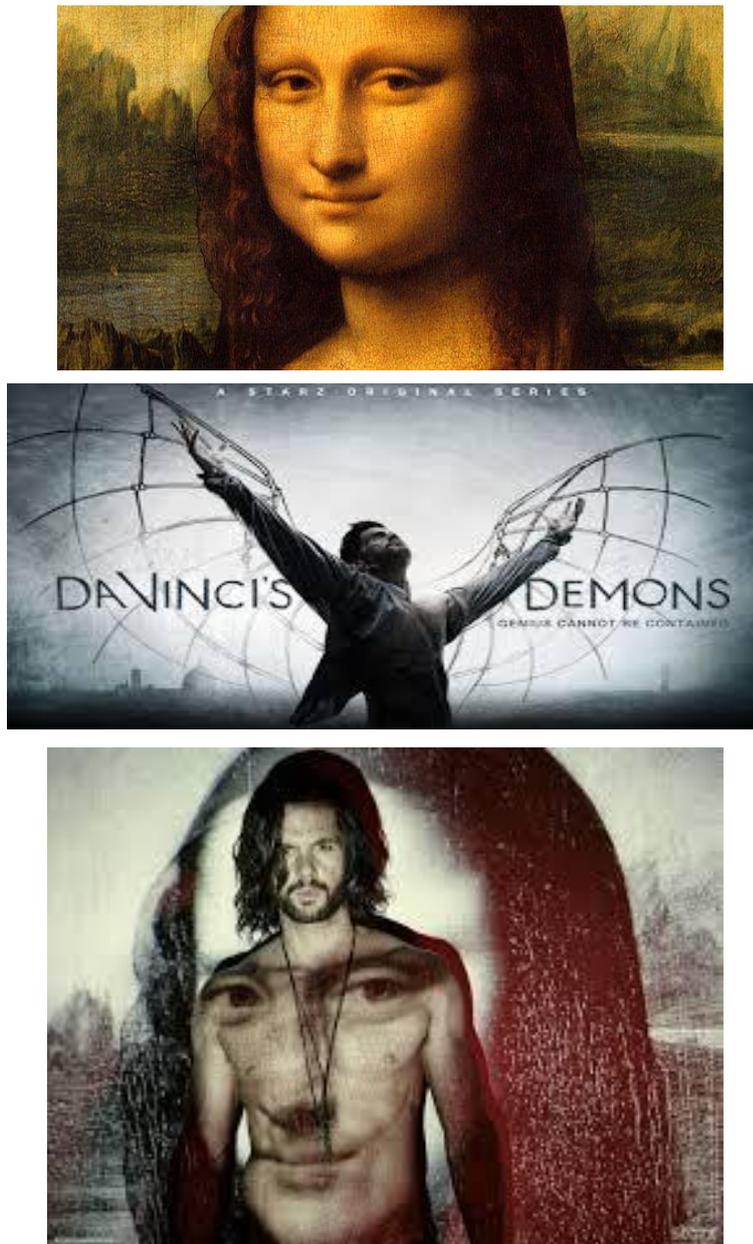


Source: Left – The Morgan Library & Museum website [5].
Right – The J. Paul Getty Museum website [6]

One could easily read these dynamics in Althusserian terms, as an interpellation of the spectator as a devoted subject eager to absorb the values of a Christian world view. Yet, the dynamics in all three portraits also evoke the early visual bond between mother and child, a humanizing joint attention that facilitates the infant's ability to identify and empathize with the parent and eventually imitate and acquire her use of gestural and verbal language. Far from being contradictory,

these two readings suggest that joint attention may be the earliest form of ideological interpellation and an empathic theory of mind. It's the conflation of these two contexts that make these paintings as powerful as the cinematic facial close-ups in Dreyer's *Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* and in Bergman's *Persona* and *Face to Face*.

Figure 8 – Da Vinci's Demons



Source: 1) Mental Floss [7], 2) Den of Geek [8], 3) Pinteres [9].

These dual readings also apply to the *Mona Lisa*, whose intriguing facial expression evokes none of the emotions linked to the codified six-pack nor to the background feelings described by Stern and Damasio. Yet the mysterious ambiguity remains, despite the immobility of the face. Perhaps only narrative can resolve the ambiguity—an assumption of BBC’s television series *DaVinci’s Demons* (2013-2015), an “historical fantasy drama” that creates a fictional version of Leonardo’s early life in Florence. Although Leonardo is unfortunately transformed into an action hero, the series makes an excellent use of animated drawings to reveal his creative thinking in visual language. Obsessed with finding his mother, he uses her face as the model for his Mona Lisa—a transgender and trans-generational design that is never totally pinned down or codified, and is always animated by the fluid play of emotions streaming across her face and within his own brain. In this way, he transformed the diptych painting from a face-off between the spiritual and secular realms into a face-to-face fusion of subject and artist, mother and son, forever immersed in a seductive close-up of joint attention.

Notes

- [1] Ekman, P., and Friesen, W. V. 1976. *Pictures of Facial Affect*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press. See site *Frontiers for Young Minds* - available from <https://kids.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/frym.2016.00015>, accessed on August 26, 2017.
- [2] Stern was first brought to my attention by early cinema scholar Yuri Tsivian. Before becoming an influential and highly respected scholar of silent cinema, one interested in the gestural language of the body and face, Tsivian had been a Latvian stage actor in Riga like his late wife Ruta, whose amazing range of facial expressiveness was reminiscent of Giulietta Masina’s, especially in *La strada* (1954) and *Nights of Cabiria* (1957).
- [3] Available from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Memling_-_Diptych_of_Maarten_Nieuwenhove_-_WGA14955.jpg%20. Accessed on August 27, 2017
- [4] Available from <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/6a/53/3e/6a533e63bc907ee938111e1a0d2d3d84--hans-memling-art-paintings.jpg> Accessed on August 27, 2017.
- [5] Edited image available from <http://www.themorgan.org/manuscript/136028>. Accessed on August 27, 2017.
- [6] Edited/downloaded image available from <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/3621/workshop-of-willem-vrelant-salvator->

[mundi-flemish-early-1460s](#)/Accessed on August 27, 2017.

[7] Edited image available from

http://images.mentalfloss.com/sites/default/files/mona_1.png?resize=767x516

Accessed on August 27, 2017

[8] Available from <http://cdn2us.denofgeek.com/sites/denofgeekus/files/davincis-demons.jpg> . Accessed on August 27, 2017.

[9] Available from [https://s-media-cache-](https://s-media-cache-ako.pinimg.com/originals/ee/5b/ac/ee5bac3679daba89c82f11400a31006d.jpg)

[ako.pinimg.com/originals/ee/5b/ac/ee5bac3679daba89c82f11400a31006d.jpg](https://s-media-cache-ako.pinimg.com/originals/ee/5b/ac/ee5bac3679daba89c82f11400a31006d.jpg) .

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