2010 Vol 10 Issue No. 1 — The Face and Technology

> EDITORIAL

We may call tragicomedy of appearance the fact that the face uncovers only and precisely inasmuch as it hides, and hides to the extent to which it uncovers. In this way, the appearance that ought to have manifested human beings becomes for them instead a resemblance that betrays them and in which they can no longer recognize themselves. Precisely because the face is solely the location of truth, it is also and immediately the location of simulation and of an irreducible impropriety.
Giorgio Agamben, Means Without Ends.

The face. But which one? And therein lies the problem. How to reduce to *the* face this thing that is different for and unique to each of us, this thing that wavers between appearance and reality, between mask, make-up, put-on, and the very locus of human identity and communicability? Perhaps we cannot even speak of *the* face, perhaps there are only faces, public and private, screened and veiled, variable iterations of a whole series of contradictory modes of being and appearing, of fronting up and representing. The face disappears across these iterations, fragmented into its constituent pores, its pixels, its molecules and particles. And yet we cannot be done with the face, as much as we may wish to, because it returns as soon as or even before we open our mouths or look one another in the eye, it is always there in front of us. This is the paradox of the face, one of the most complex and normalized paradoxes of human being; that it is separate from us, fickle, mutable, artificial, at the same time as it *is* us, irredeemably so.

The face is a vital element in the grand narratives of being for Western culture. It is the coding of the human, and the over-coding of the body, it precedes the body, it is the body's *a priori*. The face tells us where we come from and where we are going, it is the historical and structural index of our evolution and the display-home for the fantasy of human perfectability via technology. The face is everywhere in the media, on stage, on screen; it sits at the centre of a vast apparatus encompassing lights, cameras, action, mirrors, surgeons, scalpels and white-coated lab-technicians furtively grinding foetuses into expensive white paste. With the development of a global real-time media, and of a culture of the image and the interface, a culture obsessed with celebrity, with youth, aging and the effects of time, and with the transformative promise of technology, the question of the function of the face in

contemporary culture becomes paramount. What role does the face play in how we imagine ourselves, our existence and purpose? What is happening to the face today, and is this any different from what has gone before? What does the profusion of images of celebrity faces in the media – online, in print, on television and in the cinema – do to the "owners" of those faces, and to our conceptions of our own faces, and faciality more generally? How do new media, with their facilities for social networks, interactivity and telepresence, mediate the relations between faces and interfaces?

There can be no easy answers to these questions. Because faces are variable, because they are subject to capital investment in so many industries and sectors, and because they are the site of identity and power struggles, our task is not to come to some single understanding but to map the vicissitudes of these struggles and investments across multiple domains. Our task – a task this issue of *Transformations* attempts to address – is to *read* the face, and to examine the reading *of* the face.

In the first paper of this issue, Warwick Mules offers an analysis of the face as "that which withdraws from self-presence." Countering the tendency to see the face as the *site* of self-presence, rather, Mules argues that it is the *withdrawal* of the face that in fact makes the face-to-face or I-you relation possible, a withdrawal characterized by a mediation in which "I" see "you" only on the basis of my imagination of "myself" seeing "you." Using this notion as a guide, Mules provides an analysis of the "Waiting for Tear Gas" photographs of Alan Sekula, reading Sekula's photos of clashes between police and demonstrators at the 1999 WTO summit as a physiognomy of resistance.

The cinema is also one of the central technologies of the face, providing a scene in which notions of the face as identity, as appearance, as cultural product and as self-expression are worked through. In "I'm Ready For My Close-Up Now": *Grey Gardens* and the Presentation of Self," Ilona Hongisto conducts an analysis of the Maysles brothers' controversial direct documentary *Grey Gardens*. Via Béla Balázs' theories of the close-up, and an analysis of how the Beales interact with the camera, Hongisto advances a theory of *Grey Gardens* as providing a platform for the "legending" of the two main characters. Here, the close-up is not a mechanism for the display of some pre-existent interiority, but rather, it serves as a medium for a re-working of the past, a performance and updating of what a person "is."

In "GUI Faces / Sticky Ethics," Laurie Johnson explores the role of the face in the interface and in understandings of Computer Mediated Communication. Building on his previous work on ethics and the face in Levinas, Johnson argues that debates about the ethical content of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) compared to Face-to-Face (FTF) communication have tended to lose sight of the need to find common ground for the comparison. In seeking

out a “face” in the interface, Johnson aims to identify an “ethical ethics” of CMC, an ethical way to enquire about ethical relations in Computer Mediated Communication.

Quite a different face is explored in Grayson Cooke’s paper, “Appearing to Act Younger: The Face of Avon.” Here, Cooke meditates on a phrase used to advertise an Avon anti-aging crème: “Rejuvi-cell Complex makes surface skin cells appear to act younger.” Exploring the vagaries of the cosmetic use of the word “appearance,” and analysing the absurdity of skin cells “appearing to act,” Cooke argues that Avon’s rhetoric represents the targetting and construction of a molecular, technoscientific consumer, a bio-techno-logical body prone to failure and in need of a cosmeceutical fix.

Finally, in “Faces, Interfaces, Screens: Relational Ontologies of Framing, Attention and Distraction,” Ingrid Richardson explores the technosomatic relations between faces, interfaces and screens. Taking a phenomenological stance in which bodies, technologies, knowledge and perception are “intercorporeal,” Richardson moves through the traditional frontal relation between faces and screens to the variable and distracted relations between users and mobile devices, arguing that the face-interface relation is in no way given, and must be examined in the light of the specificities of the medium in question.