

Our Faces

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MUCH AS digital watches don't allow us to imagine or visualize the passing of time—symbolized on analog watches by their moving hands and spherical shape—people's faces no longer change as they used to, slowly and in one direction only (forward), but instead seem to remain frozen for years and then suddenly change in leaps and bounds. It's true that cosmetic surgery is ever more widely used, but not enough for it to bear sole responsibility for this mystery. It's more as if the collective desires of a society and an era were alone powerful enough to achieve this, and the prevailing desire in our own society and our own era is to remain young: one gets the impression that the changes and modifications to which all faces are subject now go through long periods of stagnation, which explains why there are ever more people of "indeterminate age," as we used to say. So much so that when the face of someone we know suffers a sudden deterioration, instead of saying, "How he's aged!" we wonder if he's ill or has fallen victim to some terrible misfortune, as if physical deterioration could no longer be attributed to the mere passing of time, but to some anomalous, uncontrollable force, a curse or a catastrophe or imminent death. The only changes now deemed natural are those once deemed unnatural, namely the most abrupt of changes and those that remain invisible and untraceable, just as on a digital watch the shift from 11:59 to 12:00 will remain for ever invisible or untraceable. Faces seem condemned to persist and to be either always the same or unexpectedly unrecognizable.

It's possible that this apparent prolonged state of immutability will become the norm, and the mask will only drop in the preamble to death, or even later if we're lucky: the devastation of the face so carefully preserved over decades then becomes a warning and an acknowledgment that the end is nigh. It's possible that, in future, faces will bear no trace of their biography or their journey through life, that it will be naïve of us to try and glean from someone's face the kind of life he lived, the experiences he had, or simpler still his character. Today, though, we still tend to scrutinize a face in an attempt to guess at the person or the story that lies behind it, we still expect it to have some effect on us, we still assume it will serve to give us some idea—a very basic idea—of the kind of individual before us, in order either to draw closer or to flee, to trust him or her or to avoid all contact.

The trouble is that while we may cling to this habit or expectation, it's becoming increasingly difficult to see anything genuinely personal in a face. Every age has its own faces, which sometimes belong so unmistakably to

that age that they allow us to identify them as belonging to the past, or even to recognize a present-day face as being somehow old-fashioned. Perhaps in a few years' time the faces that now inhabit the newspapers and the TV screens will seem energetic and distinctive, and their gaze—especially in those who have since died—will seem full of meaning and expression and memory. Perhaps. The fact is, though, that without the perspective or benevolence we might acquire with passing time, most of the faces we see appear to be unmarked by life, in keeping with that strangely frozen look I mentioned earlier. I'm referring now not only to the lumps and lines and wrinkles that can be covered up, postponed, or even suppressed by an operation or a nifty bit of make-up, but also to the marks—let's call them "interpretable"—that would once have been left by some rash action or grave omission, by suffering or trauma, by great joy or bad news or by some particular characteristic, a happy or unhappy childhood, a triumph or a failure, a loss or a gain, an ineradicable memory or a misfortune. It's as if people were ashamed to admit that anything has happened to them, that life has left its mark on their face.

You might think, from what I've just said, that faces have merely become more inscrutable, and that the suppression of every trace of experience is merely a manifestation of modesty and good taste, an apprenticeship in reserve and discretion, something as hard to achieve as it is commendable. And yet that tends not to be the case: on the contrary, faces are growing more and more gesticulatory, just as voices are becoming more vociferous; any expression of desire, disappointment, or surprise is often accompanied by grimaces and a great deal of (usually inappropriate) waving of arms and hands. This is probably why present-day actors seem so primitive beside those of the old school: Gary Cooper or even John Wayne, for all his limitations, could say far more with a single glance than even the very best of today's actors, despite all their technique; Robert de Niro's eyes, for example, are nearly always opaque and reveal almost nothing. "Noble faces" such as those of Rex Harrison or Henry Fonda have disappeared, and if you think of the faces we all know, famous faces, it's hard to think of a single one that really attracts our attention or prompts our interest. You could "study" the faces of yesteryear, but today's faces barely merit a second look.

This applies not only to actors, but also to people with less high-profile professions, and who are also most clearly seen on television, for the simple reason that we can gaze at the screen with impunity, without being seen by

those we're looking at: we can, therefore, study them openly and brazenly, at our leisure, and therein lies television's success, the fact that we, the viewers, remain hidden. It's odd, though, that in a medium in which voice, diction, and image should matter, most of the correspondents and presenters who appear on TV have strident voices, terrible pronunciation, and, all too often, faces that are apparently the result of a degeneration of the species or are, at best, so dull they make you feel like giving up the ghost. Many seem to have been chosen precisely for their unsuitability to appear on the screen, quite independently of their journalistic skills, about which I will say nothing here.

Even more alarming are the faces of the people who appear only occasionally on our screens—for example, the contestants in one of those interminable game shows. It's possible that, at home or among friends, they do recover a little of their personality, their individuality, their dignity and their own story, but when seen trying to win or lose some trifling prize or other, their faces are positively digital, as if, when they entered the studio, they had left their biography behind, along with their coat, in order to become anonymous figures, submissive and smiling, greedy and smug, immodest and excitable, who applaud themselves when they manage to mangle some sentence or other or crease up laughing at their own jokes, which are almost never

original, never funny, almost always stolen from someone else, and almost always in the worst possible taste. It's as if they had undergone a strange process of depersonalization, and I don't mean the loss of regional characteristics (which, on the contrary, seem to be on the increase), nor the supposed levelling out among members of different social classes and different professions (which I don't mind at all, even though I see little evidence of it), but their apparent willingness to relinquish being separate individuals and behaving as such, that is, being someone: someone who will react differently from someone else in an identical situation, even if it's only a game show with its rigid, humiliating rules intended to distract and console their invisible fellow citizens.

The faces of my contemporaries are beginning to grow equally uniform and predictable, and the worst thing is that if, as I said at the start, the changes usually brought about by age and time become postponed for longer and longer or, indeed, are suspended entirely until overtaken by illness or death, just as on those digital watches 12:00 overtakes 11:59 without anyone noticing, then we will have to get used to the idea that those faces with no past also lack a future and are therefore perpetual. Even worse, we will have to get used to the unpleasant idea that if no one entirely escapes their own era (and no one does), then our faces will meet the same fate. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Recycling

When the environment deteriorates,
we do, too, so I compost coffee grounds
and recycle green glass. The cadaver goes
to a friend's maggot farm where it is turned
into chicken feed. Where there is danger,
there also grows something to save us.
Bathers at the lake act upon their urges
and create an atmosphere of freedom. The thieving
financier becomes a priest with a shelter.
Me—I have no biological function and grow
like a cabbage without making divisions
of myself. Still, I have such a precise feeling
of the week's recycling, of a stranger's arrival,
and the tumult righting itself.

—Henri Cole