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Cover image: *Daisies* (*Sedmikrásky*, Vera Chytilová, 1966)

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Noa Steimatsky
The Face on Film
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'A face is a face'. There is nothing simpler and nothing more abstract than this affirmation which, by attesting to the real, also declares its enigma. There is something irrefutable and obtuse at the same time in Nanà's statement in *Vivre sa vie* (Godard, 1962), an acknowledgement of the face as the pure evidence of a phenomenon, lacking any singular quality. Precisely this abstract 'givenness', this mute evidence, is indicative of something based on appearance: a surface that shows itself and asks to be looked at, that defines the *image* of the subject and its recognizable identity, therefore becoming similar to a mask. The face, in fact, is not only the distinctive trait of an individual, but also the key part of a performance: the *façade* of a socially adequate identity, which can be very different from the truth of the subject. The face's function lies precisely in this paradoxical tension between revelation and concealment, evidence and elusiveness, recognition and indecipherability: it is a familiar yet enigmatic figure, singular but totally common, seductive and mysterious, the quintessence of the human and of her expressive qualities but also the index of her transformations, of the change of the very idea of humanity, of which the face — as both sign and representation — is the most evident trace. The face is considered 'the soul of an individual' precisely because of this ambivalence, its being enigmatic but also transparent, readable.

The Face on Film, by Noa Steimatsky, is devoted precisely to this element's complexity. It is an elaborate, dense study — winner of the 2018 Limina Prize for Best International Film Studies Book — and it declares its subject immediately, in the title: the book is indeed focused on the pivotal role played by cinema in defining a new visibility and shape of the visage. Within a comprehensive discussion of this 'medium of subjectivity' and of its different depictions — addressing painting and portraits, scientific and fashion photography, Byzantine icons and masks, in all their different functions and historically-situated meanings — Steimatsky analyses the transformation in our way of looking at the human being, our ability to recognize her, to read and to reproduce her expressiveness through the moving image. Consistently with Visual Culture Studies, the author combines historical and anthropological approaches as well as languages and visual arts, with the aim of defining the configuration but also the mode of the

gaze. Photography and cinema mark an epistemological rupture in the way in which we represent and experience the human. The animated face, in particular, constitutes for Steimatsky a face-to-face between the image and the body, and especially the body of the viewer, who not only recognizes herself in the images but adheres to it, thus becoming the subject and the bearer of the gaze.

As the essential 'Ur-image', the face is connected to precise frameworks of visibility and recognition: by equating it to a *dispositif*, Steimatsky 'posits the face as a paradigmatic perceptual "disposition" — a flexible configuration of attitudes relations and discourses' (p. 3). More than 'just an image', therefore, the face on film is an aesthetic and perceptual category, which reveals the alienation of the modern subject from the self. Here this takes the form of an image that nonetheless refers to a wider technological prison, in which the very same cinematographic apparatus recomposes and disintegrates the human figure — but also her truth, which is forcefully or magically captured by the eye of the camera. The main issue is clearly addressed in the introduction:

> What is at stake, then, in assuming the face as *dispositif*, is not only a type of object nor a discrete metaphor, but a complex of figural functions and relations, open to expansion and, indeed, transfiguration. The face is, then, both a compelling iconographic and discursive nexus and a way of seeing, a critical lens, a mode of thought (p. 4).

Film theory of the 1920s, which is retraced in the first part of the volume, seizes this radical power of a visage that is opened up to a (kind of) vision. Steimatsky re-examines Epstein, Balázs, Eisenstein's 'intensive face' (p. 41) and Kuleshov's experiments in the light of readings by Mary Anne Doane, Jacques Aumont, Gilles Deleuze and Yuri Tsivian: this reconstruction is as inevitable as it is attentive, connecting the past and the present, and also testing all those theories with the transformed social and cultural scenario of today's cinema and images. Therefore, by way of example, *photogénie* is 'read as a precedent to the "contemporary schizophrenia of scale", also acknowledging its "subversive potentiality"' (p. 39); and Kuleshov's experiments as the harbinger of the surveillance techniques of disciplinary institutions.

Barthes and Bazin, furthermore, become the main references for a comparison of construction strategies of the face in Hollywood cinema — the seduction of the glamour, the mythical incarnation of the stars, the wholeness of meaning that it delivers, that crystalizes an ideal of the human face — and the anti-glamour of the anonymous 'man in general' (p. 74) of Neorealist cinema. This trust in the possibility of capturing humanity in a naked, innocent, naturally expressive face contrasts with the careful 'shaping' of Hollywood, a process that Steimatsky reads as a literal *masking*. Doing so, she refers to the studies on the mask and its anthropological and cultural values.

The most original contribution of the book lies in the analyses that constitute the second part of the volume. They are all important and insightful readings, especially those devoted to *The Wrong Man* (Hitchcock, 1956), and to screen tests — from two episodes by Antonioni, to Warhol's eponymous project.

These provide quintessential examples of the conditions in which the cinematic dispositif situates the subject, that thus becomes in some way the prisoner in a lab experiment. Both cases present the same mechanism of surrender of the subject to the apparatus, of subjugation within an image:

> *The Wrong Man* offers the most rigorous dramatization of the subjugation of the individual to social and institutional scrutiny, of the thread to identity and its self-alienation under the oppressive gaze of all such apparatuses. Finally, the workings of cinema itself are insinuated in these measures of defining and containing the *persons* (p. 151).

Among the several possible variations of the face, Steimatsky privileges two: the first is the face as a single and singular figure — the single face, alone — for which the isolation within the frame is already the evidence of attention and attraction, of privilege and distance; this prominence becomes the scene of excess and fascination. It is represented in the sensuous and glamorous faces of stars, where which seduction takes the place of revelation.

The second figure is the 'face-to-face', intended both as a comparison within the image, such as the shot/counter-shot, and as a relationship between the image and the spectator. In this mirror-image — a call that it is impossible to refuse — an echo reverberates of an ancient fascination for the quality of the face to combine intimacy and subjugation, which makes it the epitome of the cinema experience. The *vis à vis* represents also an encounter with the constraints of the mechanical eye of the cinema, with its powerful, controlling gaze. The reluctance, resistance to showing, thus become forms of protection and opposition — both of the subject and of a certain kind of cinema — to this identification apparatus. This oscillation between resistance and surrender, power and vulnerability, evidence and opacity convey the subject and her humanity. Beyond the mask, but within the image.

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