

# THE FACE: BETWEEN BACKGROUND, ENUNCIATIVE TEMPORALITY AND STATUS

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## **Abstract**

This paper proposes a theory and a methodology for the analysis of the face from a post-structuralist and tensive semiotic perspective. This methodology assumes that the face is never isolated, and that it is difficult to study it semiotically without situating it in at least two respects: in its relation to a background that sustains it within a representation (uttered enunciation), and within the status through which such representation circulates throughout society (enunciative praxis). The face will be then studied according to these two parameters: 1. the genre of the portrait, which is the discursive genre that has worked the most on the face, in order to experiment with it, deform it or dynamize it. 2. The status of the face within a representation that has to be studied through practices of production, reception, and valorization of images in social domains (art, advertising, etc.).

**Keywords:** Enunciation Theory, Photography, Diagram, Status.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to clarify a theory and a methodology for the analysis of the face from a semiotic perspective, which I define as post-structuralist and tensive.

This methodology assumes that the face is never isolated, and that it is difficult to study it semiotically without situating it in at least two respects: in its relation to a background that sustains it within a representation, and within the status through which such representation circulates throughout society. In other words, the face makes sense only if we question the act of enunciation that sets it against a background and offers it to us as an object represented according to a certain gaze, and only if we study, in addition to the traces of such enunciation in the utterance (uttered enunciation, Greimas, Courtés 1979), the status of the representation at hand. These are, in my view, the two minimal conditions for having a truly semiotic analysis of the face.

The face must therefore be situated:

1. First of all, within a representation, and by representation, I mean a configuration that I assume to consist of forces in tension presented from a certain point of view (we are situated here at the analytical level of textuality). It should also be noted that any totality is sustained not only by the enunciative device of the frame, which arranges the model within a composition and fixes its limits and proportions, but also by the forces at play, which may be centrifugal, centripetal or otherwise, and that sustain any image, especially when dealing with an artistic object, understood as a totalizing composition and encompassing this interplay of forces in tension or conflict (Thom 1983). In the specific cases studied herein, the face will be situated within the genre of the portrait, which is the discursive genre that has worked the most on the face, in order to experiment with it, deform it or dynamize it. The portrait is a genre that distinguishes itself by bringing into play a dual and apparently static relationship between figure and background, a relationship that is not, except in the most perfectly static portraits of the Renaissance period, devoid of conflict.

2. Second, the face represented in a portrait must be situated within a status, that is, within *stabilized and institutionalized practices of production, reception, and valorization*. We are no longer here at the level of textuality and uttered enunciation (face-background composition) but at the level of practices, and more precisely of enunciation praxis according to Jacques Fontanille's formulation (2003), which covers long cultural cycles, and which allows us to understand according to which flows of implementation these images circulate between the various social domains, or from one status to another, and how certain values characterizing each of these domains, for example, art, advertising, science or religion, can successively be innovating, stabilized or forgotten.

## 2. THE FACE, THE BACKGROUND AND THE UTTERED ENUNCIATION

We come to the first point, namely, to the question of representation, which will be declined according to the theory of uttered enunciation, and to the question of the tension between conflicting forces. The theory of uttered enunciation concerns the simulacrum imitating, within

discourse, the enunciative doing, according to the theory set forth by Greimas and Courtés (1979). This definition notably concerns the spatial and temporal simulacra of such image production, but in our specific case, concerns as well the attentional (intersubjective) positioning of the simulacra or model spectator that the image brings into play. The flesh-and-blood spectator is, within this theory, called upon to respond to the model of conduct offered to him or her by the image. These simulacra mainly concern the dialogue between the composition and the observer and, according to Metzian theory, are primarily the simulacra of productive or receptive doing.

The image offers, or even makes actualizable, a schema of doing (observing, feeling, reacting, and so on), that is, a potential schema of reception, which can be realized in the practice of observation, or be virtualized, i.e. rejected by the observer in favor of another reception practice, with a view towards reopening the virtual combinatorics of possible conducts. The values actualized by the utterance are intended to modulate the behavior of real-life observers, who may or may not realize them.

This understanding of enunciation, which excludes any consideration of the study of the communication situation, enabled Greimas and the Paris school semiotics to distinguish communication from signification, leaving the field of the former to the pragmatists of enunciation and choosing as its field of study the signification of linguistic objects characterized by (almost) perfect immanence. We shall see how the question of whether or not to accept the propositions of the image leads us to the other level of the theory of enunciation, that of the stabilization of practices (in our case, the practice of appreciating images) that are characterized by values embodied and transformed by the various institutions that produce, classify, interpret and exhibit images, such as art museums, science and technology museums, laboratories, archives, libraries, the press, but also places of private use such as the family home.

This being said, the theory of enunciation, which is an operational theory employable as a methodology, allows a refined work on the composition of the image and in particular on the relationship between the spaces given by the *intensity* of light and by the *extension* of more or less luminous volumes, by the gazes exchanged, and particularly, by the movements between the figure and the background, the

latter being components of all artistic portraits and being often in conflict one other, especially in contemporary painting and photography.

Such conflict between a background and a figure within the portrait can be modulated in various ways. For example, the background may want to make the figure stand out while the figure on the contrary moves away from the foreground and from the viewer, almost as if to hide away by subtracting its presence. In such cases, the figure steps back, retreats into the background and functions in a manner that contrasts with the functioning of the figure facing the observer. Conversely, the background may want to prevent the figure from emerging, while the figure struggles to break free from it, in order to impose itself and expose itself to the gaze, such as in Figure 1. In the latter example, the figure attempts to overcome the shadow of the background.



FIG. 1. Toni Meneguzzo, *Arielle* (1985). Credits: @tonimeneguzzo.

From the Renaissance onward, between the figure and the background, and between the face and the background, the relationship is never pacified (Dondero 2023). We can study this relationship through what is still in my opinion a very useful model, that of enunciatonal conflictuality, within each image, between informant (subject) and observer, which Fontanille (1989) articulated as shown in Figure 2.

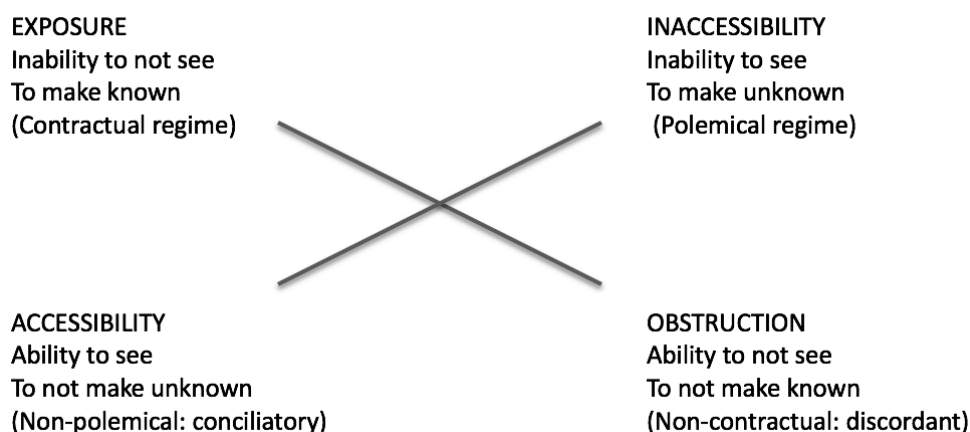


FIG. 2. Fontanille (1989, p. 100).

This schema collocates relations between the observer who wants or does not want to / can or cannot / must or must not observe and know facing an informant who, for his or her part, wants or does not want to / can or cannot / must or must not show, reveal, make known. This is a modal model of visibility, a visibility caught between wanting / being able / being obligated to see and show, to uncover and reveal. What matters is that the modalities are embodied not only and not so much by represented or (non-represented) implied actors (i.e., in that relation which, in enunciation theory, is called «personal» and «intersubjective»), but also by luministic directions, spatial orientations, chromatic dynamics (i.e., what it is called the «spatial relation» of enunciation).

We find ourselves here at the core of the problem of visual semiotics seen from the perspective of enunciation theory: it is no longer a matter of studying the characters represented, as had been done when attempting to translate the personal and impersonal relations studied by Benveniste (1981) by looking for a correspondent in the language of the image (opposing face view and side view), but rather of studying the way in which the dynamics of light and color, and those of the spaces arranged on the surface can embody modes and simulacra of a dialogue (allowed or denied) between informant and observer.

In this sense, some examples can be useful to understand how a black, impenetrable background that engulfs the figure, such in the portrait shown in Figure 3, can prevent the observer from seeing (it is

impossible to shed light into this darkness) and at the same time, the informant has no intention of revealing herself to us (the girl turns her back on us). In this case, we are in a relationship of inaccessibility, where the observer and the informant are, so to speak, «in agreement»: one cannot see, while the other does not want to show.



FIG. 3. Laura Henno, *Hidden*, 2002.

Other more complex cases enact a contrast between the one who wants to see (the observer) and an obstacle, imposed by the informant, that obstructs the dialogue, as is the case in the obstructed relationship (Figure 4).



FIG. 4. © Denis Roche, 28 mai 1980 (*Rome. «Pierluigi»*).

Perhaps even more interesting is the modal relationship between the position of the one who can observe and an informant who does nothing to prevent showing, despite the fact that an obstacle has been there, and has indeed been overcome.

Of course, there also exists the case of a totally contractual relationship between informant and observer, which is that of total exposure, where the observer cannot fail to see while the informant wants to make known. No shadow restricts full vision or full presence, declined in the present tense, in the simultaneity of the agreement and contractual form of the modal relation. Indeed, all other cases (inaccessibility, obstruction, accessibility) stage a gap in the full presence of the face represented. Now, what is this gap, and how may we study it in its development? In all these cases, it is a matter of subtracting presence from the fullness manifested by portraits characterized by presence declined in the present tense as the coincidence of the act of observing and the act of unveiling, such coincidence characterizing the ideal type of the portrait<sup>1</sup>.

## 2.1. TEMPORALITY IN THE PORTRAIT (AND IN THE STILL IMAGE)

This is why futurist experiments with pictorial images involving chronotopic anamorphoses, i.e. the iconic repetition of bodies during movement, may well appear as a mourning of the medium in relation to a lived experience or to a society that moves too fast (Basso Fossali 2017, 161, my translation)<sup>2</sup>.

It cannot be forgotten that visual discourse develops through space and that, at every point on the surface of the image, even in those points devoid of figuration, «blank» or empty spaces are there to pose resistance or to accompany forces, directions and orientations of the gaze, which are always in a dynamic relationship with one another. I speak of directions and orientations because every so-called still image, like a painting or photograph, has a temporality inscribed in the declination of its compositional space. The problem of temporality in the still image has yet to be explored, but some important work has been done in this regard, for example, the seminal text by Groupe Mu entitled *L'effet de temporalité dans les images fixes* (1988) where Jean-

Marie Klinkenberg and Francis Edeline assert that in the image, there is not only a point of view but also a «starting point of a path», that is, a chronocenter. But the most theoretical text on this question is that by Jean Petitot (2004) on Laocoon, where Petitot proposes a theory to account for the nonconceptual and nondiscrete signification that can explain duration in a still image or sculpture.

In this book, Petitot returns to Lessing's distinction between the primary and secondary forms of intuition and furthers it by considering *a temporal dimension in the spatial arts* and *a spatial dimension in the temporal arts*:

Each art form (plastic arts or poetry) possesses a form of primary spatial or temporal intuition (in the Kantian sense) which constitutes a form of its expression (in the Hjelmslevian sense). It also possesses a form of secondary temporal or spatial intuition which, inasmuch as it is not constitutive of its essence, becomes an instance of selection for the composition (Petitot 2004, 42, my translation and emphasis).

It is clear that temporality, for the plastic arts, involves a form of secondary intuition because its primary intuition indeed pertains to space: temporality thus becomes an instance of selection as regards the image. This means that the arts can transgress their primary essence; for example, when painting expresses general ideas or temporal transformations.

In *Morphologie et esthétique* (2004) and in other works on painting (2009), Petitot proposes to consider an alternative operation to that of the discontinuation of the continuous, which is given, classically in philosophy, by categorization. It is to study the unique equilibria of artworks, especially paintings, where a non-generic, unique relationship, that is, a precarious and dynamic equilibrium, shows an unrepeatable, specific rareness<sup>3</sup>. As Petitot states:

Since non-genericity is rare, it is perceptually salient and provides an *immanent, purely perceptual, criterion for defining the difference between perceptual structure and artistic composition*, at least for those artworks in which point of view plays a fundamental role (Petitot 2009, 11, my emphasis).

It is this rarity of the positions of actors and lights and objects represented within determined structural relationships that makes the difference between something we can experience and something that



only pictorial art, with its perfection in rendering the perceptual instability of a unique moment, can make us experience.

While Petitot rests his vision of temporality expressed by the still image on mathematical relations, Pierluigi Basso Fossali (2017)<sup>4</sup> also deals with the challenging issue of narrativity in the image, but addressed from a different point of view that does not aim to measure the stability/instability of structural relations in classical painting, but to understand narrativity, taking the image as its exemplar device, meaning that the narrative in the image has not to be explained through the literary model of narration:

The image may very well «make itself into a story», but it does not follow the logic of other perspectives or forms of textualization. This can only make explicit the ability of the still image to evade scholarly (iconographic) interpretation, and thus also literary interpretants, with their imposition of a narrative order. The image is no longer a target, but a new source of semantic determinations capable of claiming autonomy (Basso Fossali 2017, 162, my translation)<sup>5</sup>.

First of all, Basso Fossali reminds that the static character of the plane of image expression does not preclude a temporal mobilization of values along four axes:

1. the unequal distribution of modes of existence on the surface of the image;
2. the chain of actantial relations according to a chronological and modal legibility;
3. the reconstruction of the uttered enunciation as a trace of a performance that prefigured, managed, and maintained the established discursive relations;
4. the temporalization of the image semantization operated by an interpretive path that follows textual constraints and in particular the enunciative device.

These four axes are essential. The first allows us to consider that the modes of existence within an image are multiple. Indeed, it is possible to find in an image a part that is fully realized (e.g., with sharp contours and clearly visible and recognizable forms) and, on the other hand, a part that is only actualized (e.g., blurred or whose forms are not completely specified), but also to find a part that is, for example, totally experimental and that will later be potentialized and then per-

haps accepted by the community of artists and virtualized as a new way to imitate in order to compose space and modulations of light<sup>6</sup>.

The second point is also crucial: actantial relations within the image and between the image and the world of the observer can be ordered, i.e., organized. Think of the multiple cases of visual accessibility, where the obstacle that stood between the informant and the observer was lifted and made full visibility possible (or restored).

The third point allows us to think about the relationship between forms and production practices, with all the rhythms of slowing down or speeding up whereby the inscriptions are finally stabilized upon a substrate. The fourth point deals explicitly with the observer's perceptual path, which is not free, but determined in large part by the organization of the spatial composition. Basso Fossali also reminds us that the coexistence of different viewpoints dynamizes the image and that scenes can be arranged in contiguity, juxtaposed or superimposed in transparency (think of Rothko's production)<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most interesting part for us in Basso Fossali's text is that although the image becomes a privileged site for conceiving narrativity, the author recognizes that what makes the image so difficult to study and so fascinating is the fact that it both extracts and concentrates the extended temporality of experience: «Each still image seems to preserve its own density, which imposes itself as a kind of abridged experience in relation to what normally finds an extended temporal declination» (p. 163, my translation).<sup>8</sup> It is this density and this concentration of features that make the image so paradoxical in its narrative act. The density of the image is an agent that fixes and concentrates, or perhaps even condenses features, but is also elastic, as Basso Fossali states:

The still image fascinates because it dichotomizes access to meaning: it can conceal an anecdotal story as well as summarize an entire life, according to a discursive elasticity that moves from textual organization to the very valorization of singular and specific signs. In this way, it can atmosphericize the appearance of relationships, following an unfolding that seems almost a dissemination of actoriality, just as it can exemplify the relevance of matter, of the corporality of beings, by working on the finest grain of features (p. 165, my emphasis and translation)<sup>9</sup>.

This step is very important because it deals with a characteristic that cinema and other media do not possess: this discursive elasticity

develops from static matter, as the image has both the power to focus its attention on a precise behavior of the materiality for instance of color or of the support (which Basso Fossali calls the «maximal concentration of the identity of things», p. 164), but also the ability to stage an actorly, spatial or temporal expansion («a suffusion», *ibidem*, p. 164), something that cannot be contained either within the frame or in the course of our regular perception. The narrativity of the image, which is a narrativity that has the image as its model, would thus be played out between two opposites, «density and atomization, concentration and ramification» (p. 165).

The question of temporality (and, in a post-Greimasian methodology, of aspectuality and tensivity) in images of the face is capital to understanding the dynamics of the face and background in the portrait genre. Approaching the temporality and rhythm of the appearance/disappearance of figures allows us to analyze such deviations, subtractions, decreases, parcelings out or augmentations of the intensity of the presence of the face. See, as an example, the fashion photograph by Patrick Demarchelier entitled *Cindy Crawford* (1988)<sup>10</sup>.

In this case, the portrait, which is the genre of the staging of presence in the present tense, can unhinge this axis of the simulation of the coincidence of full gazes and orient toward the past, or toward the future like in *Diane, St. Barthelemy* (1994)<sup>11</sup>.

Often, the declination toward the future coincides with an incoherence of the gesture of the gaze with respect to the body. Note that in the second picture by Patrick Demarchelier presented above (Figure 7), behind the face in full focus, the body in the background tends to disappear, to become vague and blurred, as an act of distancing from the past.

It is also very important to be able to understand the portrait in function of the duration of the exchange with the viewer, a duration that is never given by the sole act of the eyes of the portrayed, but by the whole configuration of the image. In this sense, the gaze depends on the background. I would dare say that the duration and chronocenter of a portrait is given more by the relationship between the figure and the background than by the figure's eyes, especially with regard to the play of shadows. When no shadow is present, as in the image presented above, we are in perfect temporal attunement, in perfect temporal coincidence.

### 3. THE STATUS OF THE PORTRAIT: BETWEEN ART, SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Let us now turn to the second point of my argument, which is actually the departure point for a semiotic analysis. In fact, it is the status of the representation that enacts the face, a status that we can define as forming the global level of the analysis in contrast to the textuality analyzed so far, which is considered to form the local level of analysis. The local level of analysis is oriented by the status. In a sense, I espouse here the lesson of structuralism according to which, during the act of analysis, the global level of configuration decides on the more local units and determines the procedures of segmentation of the whole into parts. It has been François Rastier who, from a perspective between structuralism and hermeneutics, has alerted structuralist semioticians to the need of studying textuality on the basis of its status, which may be documentary, artistic, juridical, and so on. The meaning of each textuality is stabilized and institutionalized within a status and the textuality often circulates between different social domains (and consequently between statuses)<sup>12</sup>.

What is a status and what is it for in view of the study of the image and especially of photography, which is open to far more statuses than painting, the latter circulating mostly as an art object or as an object of religious contemplation? We can define it as an interpretive scheme that makes a set of values relevant within a particular domain (that of art, religion, politics or science, for example). These values depend on the domain that accommodates the images and makes them operate within society.

To better explain what a status is, it is perhaps good to begin by at least saying what a status is not: the status is not to be confused with a genre, for example, portraiture. The notion of visual genre concerns a genealogy of images characterized by the same themes and the same enunciative architecture (figure and background in the portrait, foreground made of disorganized and unstable objects silhouetted against a black background blocking the observer's horizon in the still life, etc.). The status, on the other hand, does not depend on a type of textual composition sedimented in the tradition of visual culture at all, nor on an enunciative schematization recognizable in discursive composition. The status does not work at the same level as the utterance, but at the level of an enunciative practice that has to do with the

values associated with a specific social sphere (art, science, religion or law, for example). And these values, sedimented but always changing and evolving within each social domain, make it possible to make relevant configurations on the plane of expression that apply within one specific domain and not in the other.

Bordron also reflects on the matter, although he does not formulate it in terms of statuses but rather in terms of economics. In a 2010 article, he wrote:

Economics first designates the order that underlies the possibility of values and their eventual circulation [...]. To question the economy of an image is thus to ask in what general order it fits, what fundamental articulation is presupposed in order to understand it. [...] It should also be noted that the practices in which images are «taken» are largely explained through the notion of economy. This is immediately evident in terms of sensory modes of interpretation. We do not look at images that are part of what Mallarmé called «eternal reportage» through the same temporal sensibility as images whose economy presupposes transcendent instances. Some images can be touched, some cannot, and so on (Bordron, 2010).

To provide but a few succinct examples, we can certainly recognize that values that the art domain has always questioned and put forward are, among others, self-reflexivity, historical authenticity and contemplation for its own sake, while the ethical-political domain has instead valued engagement and verification of authenticity, especially at the ethical level. The scientific status values experimentation, manipulation and verification, as well as cross-testing<sup>13</sup>. The advertising status aims to propose lifestyles, and the religious status, to connect the viewer with something that precisely transcends the image and all the mundane objects. Obviously, a photograph or a series of photographs can move from one social domain to another and thus take on one status and leave another behind. Let us look at a few examples.

Transitions between a status and another have often occurred in the case of war photographs: such images are produced as a reportage under the ethical-political status, while some of them end up, years later, being counted among the works of art of a photographer, who from being a chronicler, becomes an artist and enters the world of art where other kinds of values are at work. This is what happened, for example, with Robert Capa's war photographs.

In the case of the ethical-political status, the values according to which the image is analyzable and interpretable are, precisely, ethical.

It is, for example, the value of courage and the risk in the act of capturing the battle on the plane of content that is made to coincide with the blurring on the plane of expression of the war photograph. Along with the coincidence of blurring as expression and of courage as content, what also becomes pertinent is the possible falsification of the print – and thus the authentication of such courage<sup>14</sup>. As soon as these images transition under the artistic status, they no longer count as evidence of a courage that invites us to emotionally react, but count mainly for the aesthetic values related to chromatic and luministic sophistication, as well as to the type of blur, and they become a field for studying the style of composition (more or less classical or baroque, for example, according to the categories of Heinrich Wölfflin 1915).

Other transitions between statuses may be considered. The biography of a fashion image under an advertising status that moves toward an artistic status has been semiotically described (Dondero 2014), such as with the transition of a photograph belonging to a private, familial status (where the values are those of affection and remembrance) to an institutional status – and this thanks to its entry into archives such as public libraries, which transform affective values into values related to historical research in accordance with the documentary status (Edwards, Hart 2004).

Other photographs may shift from a professional or private status to a religious status. Regarding the case of Saint Giuseppe Moscati, a Neapolitan doctor canonized in 1987, I have studied elsewhere (Dondero 2012) the way in which a collective photographic portrait of a professional group, that of doctors, is made to morph into an individual's picture through a substantial graphical change that moves the photograph away from the representation of the secular life of a doctor and transforms it into the pious image of a holy figure that achieves the style and «average style»<sup>15</sup> (Basso Fossali, Dondero 2011) typical of the small pious images of saints. Is it still a portrait? In this case, the textuality of the photograph changes in order to assume a different status: we pass from an individual face, that of Doctor Giuseppe Moscati, to a general face, that of a doctor who heals and saves. It is no longer a matter of the face of a specific individual, but of obtaining a face that is sufficiently average and median, sufficiently vague for the observer to move away from a singularizing reading to follow another one that does not stop at details but aims to surpass them, to the point of using the photograph no longer as a textual configuration but as an object

of communication with transcendence. The destiny of pious images is to be so banal and indistinct that they must be overcome: their composition asks the viewer to turn his or her attention elsewhere, toward something not visible and more essential.

Along these shifts between statuses, the analyst's interpretive frame must also change, and with it, so should the pertinentization of the plastic features of the image's composition. The analyst must respect the value schema of the status that can make relevant different forms and substances of expression according to the selected domain of embedment.

Let us now look at perhaps the most interesting case, which has already been treated by several researchers in the Facets group, that of the composite photography by Francis Galton. Massimo Leone (2020) in particular has dealt with the case of the face as a site of identity measurement in relation to fingerprinting and identity cataloguing, contrasting the authenticating evidence of the fingerprint and the authenticating evidence of the typified face, but also of signatures and other identity seals used for forensic and judicial purposes<sup>16</sup>.

I will return later to how Francis Galton's composite photography could inspire Peirce for his theory of categorization and perception. For now, I will deal with composite photography with respect to the relation between the figure and background in the portrait and with respect to matters regarding its status. Let's begin with some questions: can one speak of a portrait when dealing with scientific experiments? Does the portrait exist in the context of science? Or is it paradoxical to imagine that it can exist, as the portrait is first and foremost valued in the domain of art as a representation of the uniqueness of the individual with whom to establish an introspective dialogue? Such has been the case at least in the art of portraiture in painting for many centuries. But what happens when faces become merely tokens of a type of man, that is, tokens of a category of humanity that one attempts to constitute by scientific means for political ends? These composite images were actually produced scientifically, in the sense that all the faces were captured according to a standardized procedure that determines the distance of the subject from the lens, the position relative to a grid, and the type of focal length. All the faces that were layered, compacted onto a single plate, were captured through the exact same parameters. Thus, the superposition of photographs of various faces to find a general face precisely follows the scientific parameters in effect

at the time the photographs were produced, that is, between 1870 and 1880 (Figure 5).



FIG. 5. Francis Galton (1878), *Criminal Composites*. Francis Galton.org<sup>17</sup>

But can we still speak of portraits when they are composed of many faces superposed in order to obtain a median, typified, general face? Though the parameters of production may be scientific, the purposes of such composite photography are political, and they are masterfully detailed in Alan Sekula's seminal text, *The Body and the Archive* (1986), which deals with the scientific and political construction of the image of otherness, an otherness that it was necessary to find in order to ensure the total control of individuals in English society, an English society threatened by immigration, disease and crime. In Dondero (2023b), I revisit some studies by Claudia Ambrosio, a Peircean scholar, who states that in these Galtonian images, the type can be found where the features of all the faces coincide, that is, at the center of the composition. In contrast, at the edges, we find the individuality of each face that escapes generalization and type. Chiara Ambrosio (2016) discusses the relationship between the center and periphery of these composite portraits with respect to the center and periphery of a category, which is plastic in itself in the sense that it can evolve by including and excluding tokens. Ambrosio especially discusses the diagrammatic totality that holds together this multiplicity of faces, where the commensurability of singular faces is always imperfect.

What is interesting in view of my demonstration is to see that an image produced as scientific, used for political purposes in the mid-19th century, in the end circulated under a scientific status some time later in philosophy and semiotics, as manifest in Charles Sanders Peirce's reflection. Indeed, the latter used composite photography to



explain the plasticity of categories, the functioning of the icon, and perception.

In his text on Peirce contained in *Sémiotique de la photographie* (2021), Pierluigi Basso Fossali states that Peirce, in his *Short Logic*, used «argumentatively the photograph as an *explicans* exemplifying the internal complexity of the icon: that is, the latter is a kind of «composite photograph» of innumerable particulars» (Peirce 1893a, C.P. 2.441) (Basso Fossali, Dondero, 2011, pp. 198-199, my translation). The photograph is conceived as a «layered memory of multiple apprehensions of spatial extension» (*ibidem*, p. 199, my translation) that would function as our perception. If the composite photograph allows Peirce to think of the icon as a diagram of multiple apprehensions of the spatial extension surrounding us, then it is every photograph that turns out to be composite, even the so-called «unique» and «instantaneous» photographs, which are in each case a globalization of superposed ephemeral moments of the state of perceivable matter. Basso Fossali cites in this regard the following sentence by Peirce on the instantaneous considered as a composite: «Even what is called an «instantaneous photograph», taken with a camera, is a composite of the effects of intervals of exposure more numerous by far than the sands of the sea. Take an absolute instant during the exposure and the composite represents this among other conditions» (*ibidem*, 2.441).

A photograph, therefore, turns out to be a composite organization of sensitive properties, as countless as the grains of the sands of the sea, and an integral of effects produced by the exposure time. Thus is how an enunciatonal strategy such as that of the composite photograph (layering of faces of individuals apparently suffering from the same disease in order to find the type to be referenced) produced scientifically and used in an ethical-political domain returns, in the humanities, to be a tool for thinking about perception and categorization.

The biography of certain photographs is long and complex and involves the passage through different statuses and systems of values. Will those photographs by Galton one day become artistic images? It is possible, and in such an event, they will then mean because of the way the faces are arranged on the surface of the composition, the type of coloring of the paper, the patina of a time bygone, and certainly also because of certain characteristics that had already been revealed by their scientific status in the humanities: the fact that, for example, each composite photograph, whether the result of 4 or 10 superimposed

faces, is always unstable between a precise central part and a blurred peripheral part. These gradations of traits, very significant in the theory of categorization and typologization according to Peirce, will surely be enhanced by the artistic status.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In the final analysis, this article has the objective of proposing two tools that I believe to be necessary for studying the face, its representations and its social circulation. The first tool, the status, aims to situate the cultural system from which the image originated and the cultural system in which it operates (if the two systems do not coincide, or if the second changes over time) and thus to situate one's semiotic analysis in a place that takes into account the social valorization of images of the face, the valorization that gives meaning to these images. If semiotic analysis does not consider the status of the texts it studies, the analysis will be totally abstract from the ground of the image and inoperative. An initial effort to develop the question of statuses had, after all, also been made in the 1980s by Jean-Marie Floch (1986) in the schematization of photography under historiographic, artistic, amateur and technical regimes, but the consequences and developments of these proposals in semiotics have been few<sup>18</sup>. The second tool is that of uttered enunciation, which has been much studied in visual semiotics since the late 1980s. This theory makes it possible to study the way in which the face is framed, illuminated, and related to the background that accommodates it (or that attempts to hide it, absorb it, obscure it), and in this sense, the relationship between the figure and the background always refers back to the relationship of the individual to his or her universe, in his or her relationship to the world, his/hers and ours.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive study of the portrait in semiotics, see Beyaert-Geslin (2017), and for a conflicting view of the figure and background from a tensive semiotics perspective, see Dondero (2020).

<sup>2</sup> «C'est pourquoi les expériences futuristes d'images picturales avec des anamorphoses chronotopiques, à savoir la répétition iconique des corps pendant les mouvements, peuvent bien apparaître comme un deuil du médium par rapport à une expérience vécue ou à une société qui va trop vite» (Basso Fossali 2017, 161).

<sup>3</sup> On the still image and on aspectuality (inchoative, durative, terminative, punctual, iterative) as a tool to study visual dynamics with tools of tensive semiotics (Fontanille, Zilberberg 1998), see as well Colas-Blaise (2019) and Colas-Blaise and Dondero (2017).

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Chapter 2.3 Image fixe et narrativité, pp. 156-176.

<sup>5</sup> «L'image peut bien "se faire histoire" mais elle ne suit pas la logique d'autres perspectives et formes de textualisation. Cela ne peut qu'expliciter la capacité de l'image fixe de se soustraire à l'interprétation érudite (iconographique) et donc aussi aux interprétants littéraires, avec leur imposition d'un ordre narratif. L'image n'est plus une cible, mais une nouvelle source de déterminations sémantiques susceptible de réclamer une autonomisation» (Basso Fossali 2017, 162).

<sup>6</sup> On this issue, see Dondero (2016).

<sup>7</sup> See Fontanille (1994).

<sup>8</sup> «Chaque image fixe semble préserver malgré tout sa densité qui s'impose comme une sorte d'abrégé d'expérience par rapport à ce qui trouve normalement une décliné temporelle étendue» (p. 163).

<sup>9</sup> «L'image fixe fascine car elle dichotomise les accès au sens: elle peut cacher une histoire anecdotique comme résumer la vie entière, selon une élasticité discursive qui passe de l'organisation textuelle à la pertinentisation même des signes. Ainsi, elle peut atmosphériser l'apparence des relations, suivant un déploiement qui semble presque une dissémination de l'actorialité, tout comme elle peut exemplifier la pertinence de la matière, de la corporalité des êtres, en travaillant sur le grain le plus fin de traits» (p. 165).

<sup>10</sup> Available here: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/patrick-demarchelier-cindy-crawford>.

<sup>11</sup> Available here: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/patrick-demarchelier-diane-st-barthelemy-1>.

<sup>12</sup> Pierluigi Basso Fossali developed this theory of the status of art in relation to other statuses in *Il dominio dell'arte. Semiotica e teorie estetiche* (Basso Fossali 2002).

<sup>13</sup> See on this topic Dondero and Fontanille (2012).

<sup>14</sup> On the authentication of the prints with war as subject (ethico-political status), where the values at work in the interpretation of photographs are the judgment of courage and the ethics of the gaze (of the too distant gaze of one who lacks the courage to enter the chaos of the battle, or of the too close, voyeur-like gaze upon the other's suffering), see Beyaert-Geslin (2009).

<sup>15</sup> I refer here to a style that is not characterized by particular saliences, nor recognizable as belonging to a particular movement or conception, but which, in short, embodies an «average» of all known pictorial styles.

<sup>16</sup> Leone (2020) is historically and semiotically speaking a crucial paper for understanding the competition between the face, the hand and the fingerprint as instruments of identification on the long term. Leone studies very ancient cases (*Il libro del Pellegrino*, IV century) up to current Apple «Touch ID» or 3D masks and Apple Face ID technologies using the Peircean categories of icon, index and symbol in order to differentiate the degrees of confidence from which each instrument benefitted at different moments in time.

<sup>17</sup> For more examples of composite portraiture, see: <https://galton.org/composite.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> On Floch (1986) and statuses, see Dondero (2015).

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