

CALL FOR PAPERS

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Remo GRAMIGNA and Massimo LEONE, Editors

THE VISAGE AS TEXT

Physiognomy, Semiotics, and Face-Reading from Antiquity to Artificial Intelligence

Corresponding editor, Remo Gramigna: (University of Turin), Turin, Italy, E-mail: remo.gramigna@unito.it

Editor, Massimo Leone: (University of Turin, University of Shanghai, Cambridge University, Bruno Kessler Foundation), Turin, Italy, E-mail: massimo.leone@unito.it

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1. Limits and value of physiognomy

The fascination with the study of the human face is constant in the history of humanity. Whilst the face is a visible element of the anatomy and appearance of the human species, it remains a quite enigmatic subject and very difficult to fathom. From ancient treatises on physiognomy to the introduction of automated face detection (Kosinski 2021) and AI face recognition systems in modern-day “cultures of surveillance” (Gates 2011), the face remains a subject of profound interest that cuts across a fan of disciplines, from evolutionary biology to artificial intelligence.

Indeed, faces communicate. They always tell a story for they are the visible core of people’s identity, unless they are masked or disguised (Gramigna 2020). The human face is the signifier par excellence (Ruesch 1959), a message board (Birdwigstall 1970), and an advertisement to the world (Thorek 1946). As research conducted in cognitive psychology and neuroscience has shown, the face is a broadcast screen onto which a multilayered array of facial stimuli is elicited and constantly monitored by others in real life settings. Information such as identity, gender, age, skin pigmentation, basic emotions, and intentions is inferred, guessed, and ‘read’ from faces. Charles Darwin (1872) held that facial expressions in humans have something in common with other animals. Later thinkers sought to identify a possible grammar of emotions through the study of facial expressions and the semiotics of human passions (Le Brun 1992).

The history of semiotics and the history of physiognomy are interwoven. Since antiquity, medical semiotics (Sebeok 1972) as well as physiognomy of different traditions have identified the human face as a significant subject of interest. Indeed, there is plenty of historical evidence showing that ‘signs of the face’, so to speak, were treated and interpreted as symptoms of certain diseases, as epitomized in Hippocrates.

The lynchpin of ancient physiognomy is predicated upon the idea that there exists the ability to identify the soul and the heart of an individual based on the shape and the nature of the human body and, especially, the face. This idea was later taken up and epitomized in the theory detailed in Johann Kaspar Lavater’s physiognomy, who defined it as the ability to recognize, from the outer appearance of humans, their inner characteristics. Thus, the physiognomic approach is often based on deductive reasoning for it posits that people’s internal make-up — one’s soul, character, personality, and disposition — can be inferred from the exterior attributes. 14th- and 15th-century European physiognomy was widely accepted as part of a vast network of pseudo- and para-sciences that encompassed magical, esoteric, astrological, alchemical, chiromantic, and divinatory approaches.

Physiognomy as a system of face-reading was influential in Western and Middle-Eastern cultures (it suffices to mention the works of Razès), but it was not limited to these areas. Indeed, the practice of reading the body as a fortune-telling practice is prominent in the texts of Ming China, which feature a profound philosophy of the body and a



sophisticated physiognomic system: *xiangshu* (Wang 2020). Ancient Chinese physiognomy was part of a larger field of knowledge — “somatomancy” — that sought to predict the future through reading the body (Leone 2019). Moreover, face reading is used in traditional Chinese medicine too.

Physiognomy has never achieved a scientific status; today, the “physiognomic paradigm” (Gurisatti 2006) has lost the central position it had in the past. It is, however, important to recognize that ancient practices of deciphering and reading faces plays a pivotal role in what Carlo Ginzburg (1986) termed as the “evidential paradigm”, and have a connection with the history of semiotics. To this regard, it suffices to mention that J.K. Lavater’s physiognomy and C. Darwin’s study on the face were included in the proposal for a history of semiotics laid out by Umberto Eco at the inception of the development of the discipline (Eco 1979).

Whilst we witness the dawn of physiognomy in its traditional meaning, new forms of face reading presently resurface through the use of technology and artificial intelligence. The establishment of advanced machine learning, artificial intelligence-based algorithms, and network-based, automated services have altered the way in which we think of faces, providing some benefits but also representing new challenges for the years ahead. What in the past was generally thought of as a skill mastered through biological evolution and engrained in the genetic make-up of a species, today has become the hallmark of intelligent systems capable of performing complex operations that involve, to some extent, unprecedented face recognition processes. In a nutshell, the way we conceive of faces has dramatically changed and opened up new scenarios.

2. List of possible areas of research

We encourage submissions that focus on, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- The semiotic history of physiognomy;
- Semiotic elements of continuity and rupture in the various physiognomic traditions;
- Comparative studies between different physiognomic traditions (Western / Eastern face reading systems) from a semiotic perspective;
- Semiotic studies on particular physiognomy traditions or studies devoted to singles authors (Aristotle, Della Porta, Lavater, Lichtenberg, Kassner, Klages, and others);
- New physiognomy and new face reading systems;



- The study of physiognomy from a historical point of view as complemented by the analysis of facial systems in contemporary culture: automated facial recognition, artificial intelligence, systems for facial recognition.
- Semiotic studies of comparative physiognomy, with particular emphasis on the Asian and above all the Chinese tradition.

All submissions to this special issue of Chinese Semiotics Studies will undergo double-blind peer review. Here is the expected publication schedule for this volume:

June 15, 2022: deadline for contributions (full papers).

Contributions should be sent to Dr. Remo Gramigna and Prof. Massimo Leone.

July 30, 2022: deadline for referees.

November 30, 2022: deadline for submitting amended versions of the contributions.

Early 2023: publication of the volume.

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Editors Bionotes

REMO GRAMIGNA

UNIVERSITY OF TURIN, TURIN, ITALY

remo.gramigna@unito.it

Remo Gramigna (b. 25/02/1981) is a post-doctoral researcher FACETS at the University of Turin. His research interests include history of semiotics, semiotics of culture, deception studies, faces and masks. His publications include *Augustine and the Study of Signs, Signification, and Lying* (2020), "Imagining others: deception, prediction, and disguised intentions in strategic interactions" (2020), "Le forme della Maschera" (2021).

MASSIMO LEONE

UNIVERSITY OF TURIN, TURIN, ITALY

massimo.leone@unito.it

Massimo Leone (b. 22/09/1975) is Professor at the University of Turin. His research interests include semiotics, religion, the face, and artificial intelligence. His publications include fifteen monographs, fifty edited volumes, and five hundred articles: <https://unito.academia.edu/MassimoLeone/Papers>

