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Title: The image of the body-face: The case of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt and Bill Viola

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Citation style: Popczyk Maria. The image of the body-face: The case of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt and Bill Viola. "Argument" (2015, nr 1, s. 99-110).



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The image of the body-face: The case of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt and Bill Viola

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I am predominantly interested in interpretations of emotional states portrayed in images of the face. In particular, the interpretations which have grown around the series of busts by Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, as well as those which attempt to expound Bill Viola's video works. I will refer to aspects of physiognomy, artistic practices and aesthetics, in order to show what each of these tells us about our attitude to the body and emotions and what happens to the body while a person is experiencing an emotion. My aim is to demonstrate how the act of depicting the body, regarded as a cognitive process in an artistic medium accompanied by a special kind of aesthetic experience, becomes a means of communication which is capable of conveying a universal message and of allowing us to define our attitude to the body.

KEYWORDS

body; physiognomy; aesthetics; art; emotion; Franz Xaver Messerschmidt; Bill Viola; contemporary art; bodily expression

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In European culture the face is the part of the body which is revealed, contrary to the torso which remains covered. Nevertheless, the face is not perceived as naked, in such a sense as the body without clothes is naked. The body-face can display a wide range of expressions: the Latin word *persona* means a person, a personality, but also a mask, like the one worn by an actor in Greek theatre, and a mask refers to a social role. Thus the face is related to the unique character of a person as a moral being, but it also implies a social face, a variety of social masks-faces assumed by a person living in a community. For Erving Goffman the face is just that: the social construct either accepted or rejected by society (Goffman, 2005). What a face can express, however, is by no means limited to a social role, as it also shows the unique nature of a person, his or her personality and exhibits the most intimate, individual emotions whose content is unintelligible to others. The face, an exposed part of the body, reveals an entire person, especially in the art of portrait.

Physiognomy, a study of a human face in order to assess a person's character and determine his or her dispositions, presumes that the outer appearance of a person can provide a clear image, or writing, pointing directly to his or her inner self. Physiognomy combines a number of fields, including astrology, later supplanted by medicine, philosophy, rhetoric, art and even theology. From the perspective of this paper, the important aspect is that this view was based on a specific notion of the body and the soul, the close correspondence between the outer and the inner. For Aristotle, a human being is the whole with parts of the soul, particularly the rational and the animal ones, manifested in the body. Thus the temperament has its corporeal expression, it is presented in a visible form. This deep connection between the body and the soul means that the soul permeates the whole body, so the body can be seen as an expression of the soul itself, and the primacy of the soul over the body is notably absent: 'Soul and body, as it seems to me, are affected sympathetically by one another: on the one hand, an alteration of the state of the soul produces an alteration in form of the body, and contrariwise an alteration in bodily form produces an alteration in the state of soul' (Aristotle, 1913: 321 [808b]). On this basis a person's visual identity can be established, and the distinction between the upper part of the face corresponding to mental dispositions and the lower part revealing passions has survived in non-verbal communication. Since the body and the soul demonstrate both rational and animal parts of the soul, Aristotle explains the appearance and movement of a person by referring to the appearance and behaviour of animals. This is a very interesting theme which can be found in physiognomy as well as in art, and later also in psychoanalysis. At the same time it must be noted that from the very beginning physiognomy focused on determining fixed characteristics was differentiated from pathognomy concerned with passing facial expressions in reaction to the emotions occurring in the body.

In modern physiognomy, represented among others,¹ by Giovanni Battista della Porta (1586), the human body is seen as a microcosm: the position and arrangement of eyes, a nose and a mouth, their size and relations between them, as well as birthmarks, furrows and wrinkles and distinguishing marks, were all seen as a map of a sort, which through the system of parallels and correspondences could provide an insight into a person's inner life. A human being belongs to the whole constituted by all phenomena in nature, therefore there is no insurmountable gap between the appearance of a human and that of an animal. In this closed universe ruled by reciprocal relations and interconnections, a human being and an animal come closer to one another and even start to resemble each other in their appearance and attributes of their temperament. This system collapsed in the seventeenth century when emotions and expressions began to be explained by the reference to anatomy in an attempt to find their biological origins. The decisive arguments were provided by René Descartes, according to whom the soul and the body constituted separate realities. We know that the philosopher was convinced that these substances formed a unity, yet he was unable to find the way to reconcile those two separate orders. In the eighteenth century physiognomy, popularized by Johann Lavater, enjoyed a period of revival. Lavater, who based his beliefs on theology, returned to the holistic view of a human being and emphasised the direct connection between the soul and the body. Lavater's physiognomy survived the nineteenth century and had a considerable following, but it was also heavily criticized.

The influence of physiognomy on painting is indisputable. Artists made illustrations for physiognomists' publications and they used physiognomy for their own artistic purposes. Socrates' thought that an artist should portray the states of the soul was echoed by Leonardo da Vinci who said that the face should be painted in such a way that it should be clear what a person presented was thinking. In *en face* physiognomical studies a face portrayed was separated from the background and established an individual relationship with the viewer. The portrait creates a situation of eye contact, and thus it removes the distance, eliminates a sense of alienation and artificiality. The viewer experiences emotions in an active way. Charles Le Brun's theory regarding the expression of emotions is worth mentioning here. In 1668 he published (Montagu, 1994) a manual for artists in which he proposed a method of the pictorial representation of emotional states based on Descartes' *The passions of the soul*. He recognized the brain as the communication centre for the whole body and proposed a kind of alphabet, a closed system of signs ruled by regularities, on

¹ Since it is impossible to discuss all the major modern theories, Peter Camper's, Carl Gustav Carus's, Franz Gall Lombroso's, to name just a few, I have chosen to focus on two themes: the body seen as the manifestation of the soul and the animalistic traits of human appearance. I need physiognomy to understand Messerschmidt's busts and Viola's video works.

which he based the guidelines for how human facial expressions and passions should be portrayed. What is significant in such an approach to the visualization of emotions is the fact that the stress is placed on movement, activity, presenting the body moved by emotions while at the same time as if frozen in the state portrayed. Since according to the Cartesian dualism capturing permanent states of the soul in artistic works is impossible, which follows from the fact that the body is incapable of reflecting the spiritual substance distinct from itself, what can be communicated is passing facial expressions. Interestingly, Le Brun retained an old reference to images of animals. This is the most ambivalent aspect of his conception. We can assume, however, that a human body, a machine, works in a manner similar to other machines, animal bodies, and that is what makes them resemble one another. What was more important for practitioners of the art of portrait, which flourished in many fields, was the visual and psychological truth of the image rather than theories attempting to expound on the relationship between the body and the soul. Thus the visual language was developed which allowed viewers to directly read the emotions represented in a picture, with the emphasis placed not on explicitness but on vagueness, non-discursive content, which could be experienced in a certain way and offered the viewer a special kind of aesthetic satisfaction. Lavater illustrated his works on physiognomy with the examples of portraits painted by great masters from various periods in the history of painting,² which might suggest that in his opinion there was more to reading a human face than following strict rules.

Aestheticians were the ones who, within the realms of philosophy of art, undertook the task of rationalizing artists' works and explained cognitive-aesthetical reactions to works of art. Traditional aesthetics draws a sharp distinction between emotions which are experienced directly in life and emotions which are artificial, represented. Stanisław Ossowski begins his discussion on expression from this distinction and refers to corporeal, direct experience, in which 'the body is for us a visible manifestation of the psyche' and we are able to 'perceive experiences' and which he distinguishes from an artificial situation created by the presence of artworks, the contact with which allows us 'to at best draw some conclusions about experiences' (Ossowski, 1966: 195). Nevertheless, he also points out that the emotions expressed in a work of art can expand our emotional lives, since, in his words, 'our existence seems to intensify' (Ossowski, 1966: 199), the image enables the viewer to see how the face portrayed displays noble, exceptional or unusual emotions. Furthermore, the portrait of a stranger's face provides us with an insight into an artist's soul, into their way of talking about the body. Viewing the emotions represented itself offers a special kind of visual pleasure. Ossowski concludes: 'We like it when

² His books resembled manuals for painters. See: Rivers, 1994: 68–69.

the inner life is strongly reflected in the appearance of the body' (Ossowski, 1966: 200). It is important to note that from the times of the Laocoön Group artists have been seeking not only to present emotions as a recognisable message but also to create a situation of the physical presence of a person presented so that the image will move the viewer.

After Descartes, a number of fields are involved in an attempt to expound expression, among them empirical sciences, such as psychology and sociology, cultural theory, philosophy and aesthetic, as well as artists who do it in their own way. Charles Darwin developed the taxonomy of expressions and emotions. He was the first to employ photography for scientific purposes. He was interested in facial expressions, not in temperament and dismissed physiognomy. For Darwin emotions are rooted in the animal past of humanity and he saw emotional expressions as vestigial, a kind of fossil. At present the term physiognomic psychology is in use and it includes the physiognomy of animals, the physiognomy of the 'facial angle', symbolic physiognomy as well as facial expressions or non-verbal communication. The artists' works, however, can hardly be viewed as mere catalogues of emotions. In a sense, aesthetics has taken over from physiognomy,³ with a work of art as a synthetic way of portraying human nature. I have chosen Messerschmitt's and Viola's works, since as images their character is ambiguous, they are double agents: they can be seen as documents, similar to catalogues of emotions, but they are also works of art and as such they go beyond a conventional portrayal of emotions and refer to the experience of a body in the process of seeing, to the reservoir of images this body carries inside.

Over the period of three years between 1784 and 1787 Franz Xaver Messerschmidt created 49 heads made of metal and fine alabaster. The head number 1 is of the artist himself wearing a hat. The heads were rediscovered in the twentieth century by Viennese expressionists seeking to express their own inner life, as well as Ernst Kris, who undertook the analysis of them. Since then they have been the subject of many academic papers and have been displayed on a number of exhibitions, like the recent one in London. Bizarre and enigmatic they keep intriguing scholars and the public alike. Messerschmidt was the artist of a high order, whose employers included the Empress Maria Theresa of Austria. He was responsible for the revival of classical art and greatly contributed to the popularity of Neoclassicism. Yet sculpting the so-called 'character heads' he discarded the greatest value of classical art — a calm — as well as the Baroque manner of representing emotional states, affects and passions. Although he retained the classical discipline of proportions and his craftsmanship remained impeccable, the works he created are highly ambiguous and virtually impossible to classify.

³ Christopher Rivers demonstrates how literature is the form of linguistic expression sought by Lavater (Rivers, 1994: 102–207).

Art historians are in agreement that the collection constitutes a study of emotions and it is known that Messerschmidt's intention was to create a general system (Pötzl-Malikova, 2004: 81; Schmid, 2004: 81–82); the number 49 was significant as it had a symbolic meaning for the artist. It is tempting, however, to find a universal ideological context for the whole series, while any reference to the Cartesian classification of emotions (wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, sadness) or anatomical studies, like in the case of Le Brun's drawings, is out of the question. The interpretation of Messerschmidt's busts is much more complicated. First of all, emotions here are linked to behaviour (Strong Odour, Childish Weeping), to a spiritual state (the Gentle), to a human type (a shepherd, a gypsy, an old man, The Satirizing One, Socrates) or to a relatively stable emotional state (the Troubled One, the Vexed One, the Melancholic One). What intrigues theoreticians most, however, is the ambiguity of the faces' expressions, the way a face expresses conflicting emotions or displays such trivial behaviour as yawning or sneezing. The faces of various people, whose age is impossible to be determined, are presented statically, which is additionally emphasized by symmetry and frontality. Such celebration of meticulously maintained symmetry (Schmid, 2004: 83) is the most suitable to show the beauty of a face, a noble countenance. According to Schmid, the combination of the static form and strong expressions suggests that the artist's aim was to find a universal meaning for trivial feelings. The classical form justifies the presentations of affects which have no aesthetic classification, such as disgust.

Although Messerschmidt's heads, providing no clues to a mental disposition or a temperament of a person presented, have no direct relationship to Lavater's physiognomical principles, we can talk about an indirect link between them, since physiognomy not only forms an assessment of a person's character from his or her facial features, but also recommends self-control and self-restraint, and offers instruction how to achieve them in widely distributed codes of refinement: a set of instructions enabling readers to discipline their bodies in order to lead a successful social and public life. The conventions make it possible to hide one's intentions and purposes, and turn a facial expression into a parlour game although they do not exclude an individual expression as long as it is kept within the prescribed boundaries. In the classical period of the eighteenth century the emphasis was on the rationalizing of a person's behaviour, one aspect of the process being the control one was supposed to have over the expression of their face and body. Jean-Jacques Courtine and Claudine Haroche demonstrated how in modern times the processes allowing a person to control their face and body resulted in the emergence of an intimate sphere of emotions which have no bodily expression (Courtine & Haroche, 2004: 11–23). Thus among Messerschmidt's portraits there are faces which are perfectly composed, but also ones exhibiting improper expressions, faces

lacking discipline, expressions inappropriate in public, which, however, are acceptable in private. One interpretation suggests that the works were meant to be satirical: the artist portrayed the residents of Vienna revealing their hidden inner selves. They certainly manifest praise of individualism and depart from the rules governing the presentation of a face. This is the main reason why they aroused the interest of expressionists and are so appealing to us, living in the era of burgeoning individual expression bordering on exhibitionism and narcissism, as pointed out by Richard Sennett (1977), while Messerschmidt's contemporaries regarded his sculptures as examples of 'tomfoolery' and 'folly' (Schmid, 2004: 81), not worthy of the Academy, the institution sacralising art, which never accepted them.

One of the most controversial and widely discussed interpretations of Messerschmidt's heads is the one proposed by Ernst Kris. The psychoanalytical theory of a creative process maintains that pathological and destructive mental forces can give rise to the creation of works which will become universally accepted and gain society's recognition. Kris makes an extensive use of Nicolai's report of Messerschmidt's illness. The heads were created after a four-year period of the nervous breakdown, during which the artist was in a constant battle with the demons of his id (or spirits according to Nicolai). Kris's analysis demonstrated that all the busts were in fact self-portraits, representing the artist as he saw himself in the mirror. Messerschmidt regarded himself as a multitude, which might point to the loss of identity as a result of disintegration, but also proves that he attempted to reconstruct his inner self through visualizing the energy of the id. Kris called the busts psychotic art, the work of a schizophrenic, but he also appreciated them as 'magical' works (Kris, 1952: 146–147), in which the artist managed to find the expression for the chaotic energy of the id. The process of recognizing his own condition as the multiplied Other, the multitude he was forced to acknowledge, became materialized in these sculptures. According to Kris, the works originated in pathology but they provided the artist with a means to regain his health, the evidence of which is the exquisite craftsmanship of the sculptures requiring the artist to be focused and precise. This process of perforating himself (Kuspit, 2010), has to be understood as a process of exteriorization of false images of himself until all the possibilities were exhausted. Thus these are not imaginary or random images, but they make up no single coherent portrait either. Messerschmidt is at the same time all of these figures and none of them. According to Kris, what boosts the creative process is the need to communicate, which allows the artist to transform socially unacceptable desires and states into a work of art while at the same time enabling him to achieve satisfaction. According to art historians, Kris constructed Messerschmidt's illness in order to demonstrate that only psychoanalysis is capable of explaining the otherness of the collection through autonomizing them from their historical context (Schmid, 2004: 86;

Kandel, 2012: 191–195). The series of busts illustrate a clinical case confirming the validity of the psychoanalytical theory.

Kris's interpretation also includes an interesting aspect regarding the motif of animal features in Messerschmidt's self-portraits. The id is sexual in its nature, which is typically visualized in the shaping of the lips — the dominant feature of most of the busts (Kris, 1952: 142–143). Kris sees the resemblance of the expression of the lips to animal features since the id is uncontrollable, untamed and manifests itself through ostentation, aggression and lack of cultural restraints, which normally control facial expressions. Since antiquity emotional states and feelings have been attributed to the animal side of the soul corresponding to the lower part of the face. In *Physiognomonica* Aristotle writes, 'Thick lips, with the upper overhanging the lower, mean folly, as in the ass and the ape' (Aristotle, 1913: 327 [811a]). This is contrasted with the expression of the eyes and forehead which reveal the dispositions of the rational side of the soul. Physiognomy, which thanks to Lavater enjoyed widespread popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in time became dismissed as a pseudoscience, due to the development of empirical sciences. Curiously, however, one of its aspects has found its way to psychoanalytical theories and an animal side of a person has come to be identified with the domain of the id, expressed in a very specific way on a human face.

In 2000 Bill Viola's cycle *The Passions* was exhibited in the spacious rooms of Getty Center. It was comprised of the video images of individual faces of men and women: a young woman's and a mature one's faces and the faces of a woman and a man were juxtaposed in a kind of emotional confrontation. There were also groups of people reacting to something out of the viewer's sight. All the people exhibited deep emotions. *The Passions* was shown in the time when the issue of emotions became an important research area in a variety of fields, and the humanities became involved in heated disputes as regards the cultural contexts determining academic descriptions of emotions. Although there is a general consensus concerning emotional experiences common to all people and facial expressions which can be compared to one another, the question that remains open to debate is how to develop a universal language to describe emotions. The widespread use of the English language in ethnography and cultural studies to describe emotions of people coming from different cultures resulted in the fallacy of Anglocentrism.⁴

For ages art has been such a universal way of communication, since a work of art conveys the content which is beyond an individual experience, in this case pain, joy, fear, or sadness. A work of art is located between an individual empirical experience of life and cultural constructs, and at the same time it is

⁴ The English language is neither a neutral nor universal language but it has its roots in the very particular linguistic and cultural context. See: Donald, 2001: 291.

rooted in both of these spheres. Viola's video works communicate emotions in such a non-discursive, direct manner in the context of European art and the theory of image. In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition Viola clarifies his artistic objectives in the conversation with Hans Belting, an art historian and a proponent of an anthropological conception of an image. He argues that the original medium of an image is a human body and that each of us carries images inside ourselves in addition to perceiving them in our surrounding and creating them. The original site of an image is, however, a human body and it is due to the bodily relation with images that a person understands him or herself and articulates his or her attitude to the body. We do it by creating more images and choosing the media for them: it could be a sculpture, painting, video or something entirely different. In aesthetics the process of viewing expressive works is the source of both aesthetic and cognitive experiences: the viewer learns about the nature of emotions and their particular qualitative tinge. It could be said that an artistic artefact communicates certain existential knowledge and spending time with artworks in galleries and museums is a cultural means for us to acquire this knowledge, the knowledge concerning fundamental aspects of human life. Both Viola and Belting, each in his own way, believe that art is essentially about the question of life, death and birth. Indeed these themes have been present throughout Viola's work. In this exhibition, however, he focuses on faces and emotions, whose spiritual dimensions, as he emphasizes, are the most important (Walsh, 2004: 199).

In the first place a number of affectively marked faces bring to mind the tradition of catalogues of emotions. For old masters they constituted an indispensable component of every artist's skill, but they were credited with no artistic value of their own. Contrary to Viola's works, rather than a complete work of art they were regarded as a starting point for more complex compositions, genre or historical scenes, mere tools employed by an artist to develop and tell a story. Viola, on the other hand, tells no story, presents no study of human personality, like those who made use of physiognomy did. He picks four basic emotions, films the actors acting them out and edits the film digitally into coherent images. When displayed in the museum rooms they move in slow motion in silence. The diptych *Dolorosa* is inspired by Dieric Bouts' *Weeping Madonna* but, in contrast to the medieval manner, instead of seeing tears flowing down Madonna's impassive face, the viewer is confronted with the drastic facial expressions of a woman and a man crying, which are shown in a theatrical, unnaturally prolonged way. In the case of representations of weeping Madonnas or Laocoön and his sons we know the horrifying story behind them, we know the cause of their suffering. Not only is the emotion clear but also its bodily expression, which substantiates the story, constitutes its artistic truth. With Viola's works the explosion of the amplified expression suggests that pain and despair are experienced in solitude and the viewer is placed in an uncomfortable

position of a voyeur spying on intimate activities. Showing the face looking at something outside the frame is another technique used by Viola, inspired by Jose Ribera's paintings of mystics who, immersed in their visions, see something that the viewer is incapable of seeing. With the figures of saints bearing testimony to the physical contact with transcendence, the past representations established the myth of immortality. The viewer of Viola's works, however, is left in the situation where some visibility is inaccessible: it is not an object of seeing but a reaction to it that is the essential content of *Six beads*.

Nobody has access to complex emotional processes taking place within a person's mind — the only things available to us are the reactions of the face and the body. Viola rather than concentrating on presenting causes shows us what happens to the human face while emotions are being experienced. The artist refutes the accusations of theatricalization: he claims that emotions are real since they are always linked to the experience of the actor he works with. His objective was to make the viewer feel the feeling. What rivets the viewer's attention is the intensity of the facial expressions, the strength of colour, the clarity of the composition and the high resolution of the screen. An autonomous image seen in a museum room expresses more than everyday life situations. Viola stresses the fact that the camera allows him to bring to our attention how his perception worked, the act of filming precedes seeing given in a finished work. Technology is the essence of emotions in that it offers the viewer the experience of their duration: the works are time-forms, 'the viewer — felt more than seen' (Walsch, 2003: 199). Video works, contrary to painting, do not show a synthesis but through long sequences enable the viewer to absorb, to become filled with emotions.

In everyday life emotions pass rapidly, they are not given in pure form, often they are a mixture of various states, they result in words and actions. Slow motion conveys the temporal character of emotions, makes them less realistic, places them in a different world. In cinematic tradition slow motion implies surreal reality, like in Peter Weir's *Picnic at hanging rock* (1975), which employs barely perceptible slow motion to suggest that the story, although apparently based on facts, does not take place in the dimension we live in. Slow motion in a film implies its poetic quality or the state of introspection, of a dream. Jean-Luc Godard uses slow motion to show the scenes we would rather not see at all: the scenes of violence. This technique also makes actors' bodies unreal, makes them appear weightless, immaterial so that an emotionally reacting body becomes light as in dance; the viewer has an opportunity to examine emotional processes in which individual and universal aspects merge with the hypnotic power. That is why we are not looking for the content of emotions, for their sources but rather watch their movement. Slow motion puts the body of the viewer in a different state, separates us from reality and transports us into an imaginary situation. Furthermore, it alters our perception, it commands us

to pay close attention. Film theoreticians argue that slow motion brings film back to painting, from which it was emancipated as an autonomous field of art. In the case of Viola, the image of emotions is a cultural form of preserving bodies in an emotional state, the visual alphabet of emotions, their amplification, the reminder and an attempt at preservation in the era when information is delivered instantly and the images of the face, in advertising, in politics, the face disgraced in wars, appear and disappear all too quickly.

There is no doubt that the need to depict emotions has existed in every historical period. It seems that what drives it is a certain kind of pleasure, which, according to Aristotle, can be derived from mimesis, the pleasure of a cognitive kind capable of affording the viewer a unique type of knowledge. The task of portraying emotions, expounded by aesthetics, is assigned to art and by no means collides with the theories, such as physiognomy, Cartesian dualism or psychoanalysis, which demonstrate that a pictorial representation of art is possible and provide arguments which make such a representation convincing. Art in its depiction of emotions involves the viewer personally: an image is multidimensional and far from explicit, which enables the viewer to identify with it; thus what he or she learns from it is directly related to his or her emotional intelligence. Emotions are not ready-made objects whose borders can be easily delineated, but by looking at the body experiencing emotions we can name, read and experience them. Psychology, on the contrary, offers the images of basic emotions recognizable by all people, but it fails to move the viewer.

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