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Violent Embrace

renee c. hoogland

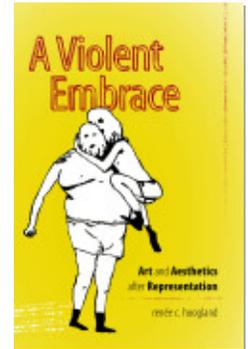
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For a minute or two she stood looking at the house, and wondering what to do next, when suddenly a footman in livery came running out of the wood—(she considered him to be a footman because he was in livery: otherwise, judging by his face only, she would have called him a fish)—and rapped loudly at the door with his knuckles. It was opened by another footman in livery, with a round face, and large eyes like a frog; and both footmen, Alice noticed, had powdered hair that curled all over their heads. She felt very curious to know what it was all about, and crept a little way out of the wood to listen.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

SIX VISUALIZING THE FACE

face value and dévisage

In her encounter with the liveried footmen in chapter 6 of *Alice in Wonderland* (see figure 6.1), Alice, with her usual yet uncanny perspicacity, returns us to the paradox of visual reality, of the actuality of our experience in a world that is at once, and primarily, perceptible and yet, albeit it not necessarily, potentially intelligible as well. Defying St. Thomas's earlier cited claim that seeing is believing, Alice raises the question of meaning and being as it plays out in her contradictory desires for both spectacle and knowledge, between what she sees—or, to use Whitehead's more precise term, between what she "pre-hends"—and what she is trying to read, understand, *comprehend*. The paradox of visual reality is here enacted in the appearance of two indecipherable creatures, part human, part animal, a fish-faced and a frog-faced footman facing each other. Alice's curiosity, her desire to know, is simultaneously aroused by and deflected from the spectacle of the two other-faced figures. Rather than trusting her eyes, her immediate perception of the figures' faces, Alice allows her attention to be redirected toward their attire and, furthermore, to the sealed envelope, the letter at the center of the transaction taking place between them. In the play of sense and nonsense that is Alice's Wonderland—in what Deleuze calls the "chaos-cosmos" or chaosmos of Lewis Carroll's work (*LS*, xiii)—that which arouses Alice's curiosity is both con-sealed in and eludes the letter, the event of language.

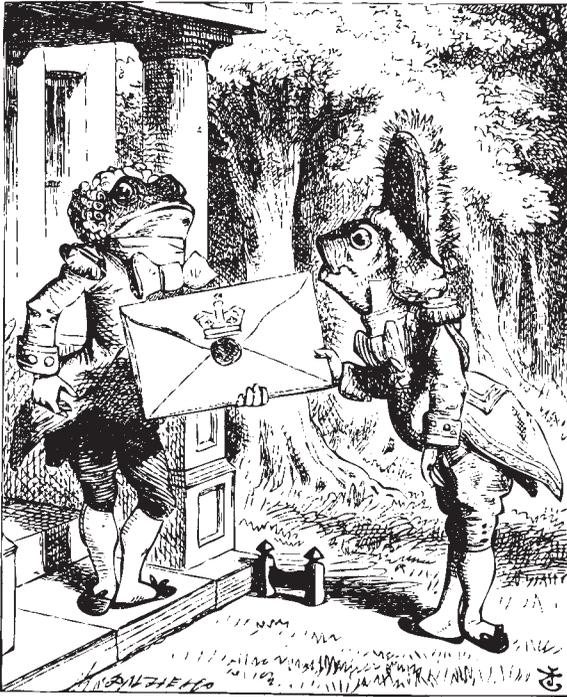


FIG. 6.1 John Tenniel,
Pig & Pepper, original
illustration from *Alice's
Adventures in Wonderland*,
by Lewis Carroll, 1865.

Language, Deleuze maintains, “fixes the limits (the moment, for example, at which the excess begins), but it is language as well which transcends the limits and restores them to the infinite equivalence of an unlimited becoming” (LS, 3). Carroll plays havoc with the everyday coordinates of language by placing Alice’s private considerations, the articulation of her perceptual reality, in parentheses. He thereby draws our attention to the peculiar capacity of written language to externalize what in actual experience remains hidden, inaccessible both to others and also largely to ourselves, that is, a human being’s conscious and unconscious thoughts. Conventionally regarded as a more profound level of “truth” in a story’s imaginary reality, the character’s “interiority” is nonetheless subordinated to that which is clearly visible, a reality that is in this instance equally produced exclusively in language. Alice in her turn creates a virtual chaosmos, in that she literally reverses the terms of reference of Platonic dualism by disregarding the immediacy of her perceptual reality, the pictorial surface of the footmen’s animal faces, in favor of the overlay of social meaning in their liveried bodies.

Central, then, as language or the “great letter, nearly as large as [the fish-footman] himself,” appears to be in this scene of curious desire, it is nonetheless Alice’s act of reading, or misreading, or, indeed, of her reading against the grain of the bodies-cum-faces of the fish-footman and the frog-footman that points up

the centrality of the visual, of the image, if not of the imaginary in the fixing of meaning. It simultaneously points up its function as the “moment at which the excess begins,” as the site of unfixing, the moment that restores the signifying and identifying operations of language to the “infinite equivalent of becoming,” which, needless to say in the context of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, is also the site of unbecoming.

In its irreducibility to either the perceptual (spectacle) or the intelligible (knowledge), the scene of Alice’s encounter with the fish-footman and the frog-footman succinctly, and brilliantly, articulates the central question I wish to explore in this chapter, which is the paradox of visuality and visualization in the context of documentary film. Continuing various lines of thought developed previously—in my engagement with the photographic image as at once pictorial surface, as an expressive event, and the potentiality for an occasion of partial becoming—my concern with documentary film similarly focuses on this form of mediated visual expression in its complex functioning, its ambivalence, as at once representation and presentation, an extraction and organization of the real and hence something that is subject to procedures of understanding or comprehension, on one hand, and as an artistic creation, the site for an “aesthetic event” (Bakhtin), an “encounter” (Deleuze), or an “occasion” of prehension (Whitehead) on the other. I will argue that the paradox of technical visualization, of the production of a visual reality in film, finds its culmination in the imaging, the cinematic (re)presentation of the human face, especially of the face in close-up. Like the animal faces in the chaosmos of *Alice in Wonderland*, the cinematic face presents itself as the site of meaning and identity while simultaneously eluding, effacing its limits, and dissolving its signifying functions. Theoretically, I will work through this proposition with reference to, among other things, the Deleuzian distinction between the actual and the virtual, as well as his and Guattari’s notion of faciality and the face in cinema. The chapter as a whole, however, is inspired by and generally organized around the work of Dutch filmmaker/photographer Johan van der Keuken (1938–2001), in particular his award-winning film, ironically yet appropriately entitled *Face Value* (1991).¹

Before saying more about van der Keuken and his preoccupation with the face, let me try to approach the paradox of the visual reality of cinema and, more specifically, the ambivalence at the heart of documentary film, by exploring a notion we have come across but which I have not actually discussed before, that of the “*partage du sensible*” developed by Jacques Rancière. In French, the word *partage* has two, almost opposite meanings: to share, or to have in common, on one hand, and to divide, to portion out, on the other. This dual meaning gets lost in English translation, where *partage* usually appears as “distribution,” which is also the word used by the author himself when he writes in English. In the opening chapter

of *The Politics of Aesthetics*, titled “The Distribution of the Sensible,” Rancière uses the original French phrase to define the “distribution of the sensible” as the “system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.”² In view of the centrality of the notion in his thought, it is nonetheless important to bear in mind that the *partage du sensible* is not just the way images, bodies, objects, and places are distributed across the field of sense perception, but that it is also the division of the sensible into that which is speakable, thinkable, visible, audible, and that which is not, that which is “portioned out.” Indeed, it is for this reason that Rancière can insist that there is an “aesthetics’ at the core of politics,” which should not be understood in Benjaminian terms, that is, as the “aestheticization of politics,” but rather in a post-Kantian sense, as the “system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience.”³

In her recent book on documentary film, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* (2011), Elizabeth Cowie links Rancière’s notion of the sensible with Deleuze’s distinction between the actual and the virtual. She suggests that we “must apprehend the actual as a ‘sensible,’” and furthermore “engage in a movement between a living and dwelling as the affectual, and a becoming a subject of knowledge that is constructed virtually in a transforming of the real into reality.”⁴ On this view, the notion of the *partage du sensible* would seem to capture, if not quite yet explain, the dual function of documentary film as both an extraction and organization of the real (representation/distribution) and an artistic creation (presentation/division), and thus complicate a function that is more commonly defined in terms of the seemingly much more straightforward distinction between nonfiction and fiction. Deleuze’s actual/virtual distinction adequately confuses such ostensible straightforwardness.

Deleuze sets up the distinction between the actual and the virtual in opposition to that between the possible and the real so as to conceptualize, in Constantin V. Boundas’s gloss, “two mutually exclusive, yet jointly sufficient, characterisations of the real.”⁵ Deleuze begins to develop the notion of virtuality in relation to multiplicity as early as 1966, in his study of Bergson.⁶ In this book, his main concern is to replace the Kantian notion of the conditions of possibility of representational knowledge with a notion of the condition of the genesis of the real. Bergson’s critique of the possible is, in oversimplified terms, that the idea of reality as a realization of the possible suggests that the real is something more than possible, that it is a past possibility with real existence added to it. This is a false suggestion for Bergson because there is always more in the idea of the possible than there is in the idea of the real, just as there is always more in the idea of nonbeing than there is in the idea of being. For Deleuze this means that the

condition of the genesis of the real is the virtual, which is fully real, for genesis is a process of actualization, not of realization (of past possibilities). As a radical or transcendental empiricist, Deleuze nonetheless insists on thinking the real through experience. He thus posits the virtual as the ground of individuation and personalization, but it is, crucially, a “ground that cannot resemble what it grounds”⁷ and that must therefore be conceptualized as nonpersonal and pre-subjective. In the words of Daniel Smith and John Protevi:

The virtual is the condition for real experience, but it has no identity; identities of the subject and the object are products of processes that resolve, integrate, or actualize (the three terms are synonymous for Deleuze) a differential field. The Deleuzian virtual is thus not the condition of possibility of any rational experience, but the condition of genesis of real experience.⁸

The importance of the distinction between the actual and the virtual in Deleuze’s ontology may appear not only from the fact that it emerges in his earliest work and continues to inform all of his subsequent thought, but that he also devotes to this theme his last piece of writing, the essay “Immanence: A Life” (1995),⁹ which he wrote, as John Rajchman puts it, in a “strange interval before his own death” (by suicide) and which is often considered as a testament of sorts “at a time of renewed difficulty and possibility for philosophy.”¹⁰ Moreover, Deleuze’s very last text, published as an appendix to the second edition of *Dialogues II*, is literally titled “The Actual and the Virtual” (hereafter “A/V”).¹¹ With their shared focus on the actual/virtual, these two short essays, which some Deleuze scholars believe to be chapters (drafts) of an unfinished project called “Ensembles and Multiplicities,”¹² simultaneously mark Deleuze’s positioning as an empiricist and a philosopher of immanence¹³ and testify to his significance for the study of the moving image, for it is in relation to cinema that the actual/virtual distinction, as Cowie also suggests, has proven to be particularly valuable.

As Boundas points out, in developing his notion of the virtual, Deleuze was not only influenced by Henri Bergson’s critique of the possible, but also by Baruch Spinoza’s idea of “differentiated substance” and by Nietzsche’s concept of the “eternal return.”¹⁴ Philosophy, Deleuze posits, is the “theory of multiplicities,” each of which is “composed of actual and virtual elements” (“A/V,” 148). The virtual is not an image of the transcendental in a post-Kantian sense, but a purely differential field or multiplicity that cannot resemble the image of empirical experience, a ground that cannot appear as the figure of form to which it gives rise. Yet, since there is no such thing as a “purely actual” object, every actual, Deleuze insists, “surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images” that constantly renew themselves, that produce other virtual images by which they are in turn surrounded, and that are both emitted and absorbed by actual images (“A/V,” 148).

Virtual images, however, equally react upon the actual: as a consequence of their “mutual inextricability,” virtual images are not “unreal,” but a temporally distinct dimension of the real so that “virtual images are able to react upon actual objects” (“A/V,” 149). The actual/virtual distinction thus replaces both the traditional divide between the true and the false and that between the real and the unreal.

Addressing the actual/virtual distinction in direct relation to film, in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985; hereafter *c2*),¹⁵ Deleuze shows that in certain kinds of images, what he calls the “crystal-image,” the distinction between actual and virtual becomes indiscernible. In the formation of such an image with two sides, an actual one and a virtual one, it becomes impossible to attribute actuality and virtuality as distinct aspects, in that each side can be seen to be “taking the other’s role in a relation we must describe as reciprocal presupposition, or reversibility.” The fact that there are images that are “by nature double,” that is, images in which the real and the imaginary, the present and the past, the actual and the virtual cannot be discerned, leads Deleuze to the conclusion that there is “no virtual which does not become actual in relation to the actual, the latter becoming virtual through the same relation” (*c2*, 69).

It will be clear that Deleuze’s replacement of the true/false and the real/unreal oppositions with the actual/virtual distinction complicates the traditional terms in which documentary film has been defined and distinguished from feature or fiction film. Indeed, what his insistence on the actual and the virtual as reversible characterizations of the real entails is, first, that it becomes impossible to distinguish between real and unreal images (an urgent question in the age of digitization) and, second, that since the virtual is real insofar as it affects us, the evaluation of any image requires us to examine its intrinsic qualities, its actuals affecting us, on the perspective of the multiple forces it virtually contains. The latter inference explains why Cowie associates Rancière’s notion of the “sensible” with Deleuze’s “actual.” It furthermore encourages us to take up Rancière’s description of the “politics of aesthetics” as the “system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” in order to consider the idea of the *partage du sensible* in relation to his writing about film.

While Rancière’s concept of the *partage du sensible* and Deleuze’s actual/virtual distinction are not quite the same, the similarities between them are nonetheless remarkable. It is therefore surprising to find Rancière, despite his insistence on the oppositional claims of the sensible, elsewhere, and with specific reference to film, maintain a clear difference between the fictional and the documentary function. To be sure, he admits, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction does not reside in any given text, but instead arises from differentiated forms of authorization in specific historical contexts. Fiction, Rancière argues, is not a “pretty story or evil lie,” but designates the practice of “using the means of art to construct a

‘system’ of represented actions, assembled forms, and internally coherent designs.” Hence, he continues, we “cannot think of ‘documentary’ film as the polar opposite of ‘fiction’ film simply because the former works with images from daily life and archive documents about events that obviously happened, and the latter with actors who act out an invented story.” As a fabrication, a creation of a new reality—not a social or actual reality, but the reality of the film—the documentary is as fictional as any product of creative practice. The real difference between fiction and documentary film, Rancière submits, is that “instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced,” documentary film “treats it as a fact to be understood.”¹⁶

In our rapidly visualizing, increasingly digital cultural context, the understanding of seeing as believing, I have argued earlier, cannot possibly hold the purchase it traditionally may have had—and the scene from *Alice in Wonderland* cited at the beginning of this chapter underscores that it might never have been an adequate idea in the first place. Rancière’s characterization of documentary film (not to mention the overall ocularcentrism that still largely prevails in other sociocultural practices, such as science and technology) indicates that the notion of vision as a site of understanding nevertheless remains compelling. Yet even Alice’s response to the sight of the fish-footman and the frog-footman critically challenges the distinction between the cinematic presentation of the real as either an effect to be produced or as a fact to be understood, a challenge that at once points up the centrality of the visual in the fixing—and, as the case may be, the unfixing—of meaning, and that directs us to the other Deleuzian concept I have suggested to be of great significance to Johan van der Keuken’s film practice, namely, the notion of the face or, more accurately, of “faciality.” In order to adequately address the operations of van der Keuken’s *Face Value*, I must first try to bring these two concerns, the documentary treatment of the real and the signification of the face, together.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the face, as it is first theorized in detail in *A Thousand Plateaus*, stands at the intersection of two semiotic systems, signification and subjectivation. Faciality is not the same thing as the face itself, but a function that operates in the form of what they call a “white wall/black hole system” (TP, 167). In this system, the “black hole” or unknown zone of the face, the zone in which affective energies may be invested, is correlated with subjectivation, while the “white wall,” the surface upon which signs are projected and from which they are reflected, corresponds with signification. The face is “not an envelope exterior to the person who speaks, thinks, feels,” Deleuze and Guattari write, for without guidance from the face, the “form of the signifier in language, even its units, would remain indeterminate” (TP, 167), that is, without the help of the face the listener would not be able to make her or his choices about meaning. They furthermore point out that the face is not “basically” individual, but rather “constructs the walls

that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of” while simultaneously “dig[ging] the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through.” The face is thus not something that simply exists, that comes “ready-made,” but rather comes into being as the effect of an “abstract machine of faciality” (TP, 168). It is this “abstract machine” that engenders the face as surface: “Facial traits, lines, wrinkles; long face, square face, triangular face; the face is a map” (TP, 170).

From the understanding of the face as a “map” or “surface,” Deleuze and Guattari infer that the head is included in the body, but the face is not. The face needs to be produced, is the product of a process, of *facialization*, the effect of the operation of an “abstract machine,” an operation that is both “horrible and magnificent”:

The head, even the human head, is not necessarily a face. The face is produced only when the head ceases to be part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code—when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be *overcoded* by something that we shall call the Face. (TP, 170)

Deleuze and Guattari conclude that the face, standing at the crossroads of signifi- cance and subjectivation, is a production “in humanity,” but the necessity by which it is produced “does not apply to human beings ‘in general,’ nor is the face “animal.” Rather, there is something inhuman about the face: “The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start” (TP, 171).

On this account of the face and its machinic production, Alice would appear not only to confuse the intelligible and the sensible in her encounter with the animal-faced footmen by privileging the socially legible, meaning bestowing uniforms covering their bodies over their faces, which, despite their perceptual immediacy, are reduced to signifi- catory secondariness. She can also be seen to trigger, in her own lateral and nonsensical way, the abstract machine that produces the face. The faces of the footmen, the frog-face and the fish-face, do not appear to obtain within what Deleuze and Guattari designate the “black hole/ white wall” system. Instead, the footmen’s entire bodies are facialized in Alice’s willful reading practice: the liveried bodies are turned into legible surfaces or maps, while the footmen’s heads, being (or having become) animal, appear to escape the process of facialization, to “dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible” (TP, 171). As one among innumerable delightful instan- tiations of Carroll’s ability to confront us with the many “paradoxes of sense,”¹⁷ Alice’s reading/seeing practice makes the ordinary operation of faciality and facialization palpable, not as something given or “basic,” nor even as something necessarily human, but rather as a product of machinic operations. The paradox of her perception hence alerts us to the traditional model of the human face, a model that centers on its function in the process of communication.

It is in his later solo work, the first of his two books on cinema, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (1983; hereafter *CI*),¹⁸ that we find the second locus of Deleuze's theorization of the face. Here, he describes the function of the human face as follows:

Ordinarily, three roles of the face are recognizable: it is individuating (it distinguishes or characterizes each person); it is socialising (it manifests a social role); it is relational or communicating (it ensures not only communications between people, but also in a single person, the internal agreement between his character and his role). (*CI*, 99)

The puzzling appearance of the footmen's animal faces, perceptually recognizable to Alice yet displaced by the operations of the meanings of their socially legible bodies, throws this traditional communicational model into confusion. The apparent readability, the facialization of the liveried bodies, and the "quite special becomings-animal" of the footmen's heads, their escape from the "inhuman in human beings," conjures up Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the face as the "very special mechanism" at the intersection of signifi-ance and subjectivation (*TP*, 171, 167), in its resonance with and distinction from Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the human face as the "source from which all meaning appears."¹⁹

I evoke Levinas's reflections on the ambivalence of the human face at this point because his alternative theorizations allow me to do two things. First, they enable me to return to the question of the functioning of documentary film, in its simultaneous framing and unframing operations, to challenge Rancière's understanding of its organization of the real as a fact to be understood rather than as an actualization of the virtual to produce its reality as an actual effect. Second, Levinas's thought enables me to link up the actual/virtual distinction with Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of faciality in tandem with Deleuze's subsequent application of these ideas to the operation of the face in cinema in *Cinema 1*, especially to the function of the face in close-up. Both the question of the organization of the real and the cinematic operation of the face are central to van der Keuken's film *Face Value* (1991).

Born in Amsterdam in 1938, van der Keuken was originally trained as a photographer and published his first book of photo portraits, *We Are Seventeen* (1955), while still in high school.²⁰ Suggestive of his later work, the thirty pictures of his teenage friends collected in this publication are of a striking yet telling simplicity: all the photos appear to capture people doing essentially nothing, to present nothing much more than the experience of the moment itself. Van der Keuken's second book, *Behind Glass* (1957),²¹ appeared while he was studying filmmaking in France, where other young Dutch filmmakers such as Joris Ivens, Louis van Gasteren, and Bert Haanstra were already enjoying growing critical acclaim. Though van

der Keuken is primarily known today as one of the most illustrious and innovative independent filmmakers of the twentieth century, most of his work reveals his origins in photography.²² In one of the very few scholarly writings devoted to the photographer-filmmaker's work, film critic Thomas Elsaesser contends, while placing him in a specifically Dutch tradition of filmmaking, that there is really no question of competition between the two media for van der Keuken: "He knew how to catch the instant (the gift of the photographer), while making us feel how this instant belonged in a continuum, a movement, a process."²³

Most critics agree that van der Keuken is in the first instance an image maker, even if it is not always entirely clear what they mean by this. Film critic-historian and curator Bérénice Reynaud, for example, begins her reflections on the filmmaker's work by describing a range of "evocative, often disturbing images," which come to her mind when she thinks about his films.²⁴ "Powerful" and "often disturbing" as they may be, these images do not, for Reynaud, call forth memories of the films qua films: "Yet, only images. Images from which *something is missing*." Reynaud associates the lack she perceives in these images with van der Keuken's "dialectical, playful and rigorous approach," which she suggests works against the grain of "memory-hoarding, nostalgia, hagiography." Despite her emphasis on the centrality of the image in van der Keuken's films, Reynaud unaccountably goes on to explain this approach by singling out cinema, as distinct from other forms of image making such as television or advertising, as a medium that is, and here she takes recourse to the words of French film scholar Marie Chevré, "not the image, it is the recording of a moment."²⁵ Even apart from its blatant contradictions, I find this argument quite unpersuasive. Although Elsaesser's use of the word "image" is similarly undertheorized, his claim that what is "central" to van der Keuken's films is not so much their left-wing politics, their idiosyncratic themes, or unusual topics, but "the 'image' (which, of course, for him included sound, words and movement),"²⁶ is closer to my own viewing experience. For in my repeated encounters with van der Keuken's films—admittedly in the wake of and after embracing the affective turn—I do not perceive moments, or the recordings of moments, but on the contrary (as Reynaud herself initially appears to suggest) images, images in the dual sense proposed in previous chapters, as potentially significant but in the first place pictorial surfaces, artificial presences in their pure visibility, as aesthetic objects.

The function of the image, as I have maintained in relation to photographic or still images and as I am presently suggesting with respect to moving images as well, has not so much to do with representation, with the construction and distribution of knowledge, with treating reality as a fact to be understood. Any image, like everything else, may function as a sign, as a carrier of meaning, but they need not take on this function. Images, if they present themselves as objects

of our concern, do so in our actual encounter, the occasion of our experience of them, in a prehension: they first and foremost affect us—in a powerful and potentially “disturbing” manner—in our embodied being, as organized aesthetic activity, prior to any act of interpretation and/or comprehension. Moreover, in its ineluctable depthlessness, as surface structure, the image may be argued to actively engage in the *partage du sensible* in the sense suggested by Rancière, that is, in the way bodies, objects, and places are distributed across the field of sense perception, and thus in the division of the sensible into that which is speakable, thinkable, visible, and audible and, at the same time, that which is not, that which is “portioned out” or excluded. But as the word *partage* itself indicates, such distribution does not constitute a differentiation between the possible and the real, or between the real and the imaginary, but rather defines the reversible relation between mutually exclusive yet inextricable characterizations of the real, the actual and the virtual. Images arising from the purely differential field, from the multiplicity of the virtual, affect us in the first instance largely unconsciously, precisely by presenting themselves in their actualization in the sensible, that is to say, aesthetically.

The *moving* image imposes its distributing operations in the sensible surreptitiously, and thus, I would argue, perhaps even more so than the still or photographic image, more violently, by appearing to offer us fluidity, sequentiality, continuity, and ostensible wholeness. Van der Keuken’s background in photography made him fully aware of the singular operations of the moving image. As Reynaud points out, he turned to filmmaking “with the full acceptance of his new medium’s double challenge: the passage of time—in which each image is ‘annihilated’ (his word) by the one just after it—and the constant necessity/desire/temptation to *reframe*.”²⁷ This may be one of the reasons yet another French critic, Alain Bergala, characterizes van der Keuken’s work as the “art of anxiety.”²⁸ I will have more to say about the question of re/framing in a moment. For now, let me suggest that van der Keuken’s keen awareness of the moving image’s paradoxical capacity to simultaneously enact a certain sensual plenitude, to present an overabundance of visuality and to annihilate the image, to portion out, to exclude things from the field of vision, is acutely palpable in his films. While on one hand accounting for the fact that it is hard to remember these films as films rather than as images, it is on the other hand this “anxiety” over the medium’s un/framing operations that explains the filmmaker’s abiding fascination with the human face—apparent from his first published photographic work, through all of the fifty-five films he subsequently produced, culminating in *Face Value*.

On the sales website of Arte.TV, the main distribution center of European documentary films, *Face Value* is described as “an epic on humanity and cultural diversity in Europe through a multitude of appearances, a cartography of faces,

the reflection of an imaginary Europe made up of London, Marseille, Prague and the Netherlands.”²⁹ While to some extent illuminating (especially from a sales perspective), such a description situates van der Keuken and his film in the context of a politically engaged, if experimental, tradition of specifically *documentary* filmmaking. Van der Keuken himself objected to being classified as a documentary filmmaker, partly because he was also a photographer and writer and, in fact, a multitalented artist, but primarily because to him and his work, the distinction between fiction and documentary made no sense. Consequently, his films, socially engaged and most of the time politically dissident as they are, do not necessarily invite us to infer their underlying social meanings or ulterior, referential realities; they do not, as Rancière would have it, treat the real as a fact to be understood.

Van der Keuken’s insight into the “filming process itself, and its physical aspects, the editing, the rhythm, etc.” makes him reject any notion of film as a symbolic or symbolizing medium. In a short essay published in 1963, “Film Is Not a Language,” he therefore dismisses any critical attempts to “read” his or any other films in significatory terms:

Film is not, as is often assumed, a language in which certain combinations of signs refer to certain concepts and in which series of combinations of signs can be arranged into a syntax [*sic*]. Film has no sign and no significance. . . . People who refer to film as a language are essentially referring to a limited number of signals to which there are a limited number of conditional responses. . . . These signals have nothing to do with film itself. . . . The film is an instrument for the registration, reinforcement and distribution of the signal. All it can do is show, but it can show anything, in any way.³⁰

Such insistence on the nonsignificatory operations of the film-image, its refusal to be captured within the closed terms of symbolic determination, marks film as the site of excess, a site where things can happen—film can show anything, in any way—but whatever happens in film cannot be reduced to concepts, to combinations of signs, or be brought under the order of syntax or of the signifier. Film as such, in other words, does not organize the real as an object of understanding.

Indeed, the very notion of the real is subject to van der Keuken’s profound creative doubt. In her earlier-mentioned essay, Reynaud quotes a passage from one of the interviews she conducted with the filmmaker in which he gives particularly clear expression to such doubt:

For me, the doubt about the Real of one’s film has two causes. First, a belief that the Real is not a given, that it has to be suggested between the images; images are nothing but fragments, traces, bits of evidence, of something that has remained

elsewhere. Second, a process takes place in the spectator's mind, that consists of de-realizing these images from the Real to, paradoxically, prove their reality, or to the contrary, their artificiality.³¹

Van der Keuken's reflections on the Real in the first half of this passage recall Deleuze's distinction between the actual and the virtual as it plays out in terms of the founding concept of the plane of immanence. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that there may be "two planes" or "two ways of conceptualizing the plane":

The plane can be a hidden principle, which makes visible what is seen and audible what is heard, etc., which at every instance causes the given to be given, in this state or that state, at this or that moment. But the plane itself is not given. It is by nature hidden. It can only be inferred, induced, concluded from that to which it gives rise (simultaneously or successively, synchronically or diachronically).
(*TP*, 265)

What van der Keuken designates the Real is a hidden or organizational principle that cannot be perceived, is not given, and that can be described as "ungiven," as something that has "remained elsewhere," but which can be inferred from that to which it gives rise: the images or, rather, the images' in-between. The Real of his films is a compositional principle that is not itself visible but which serves to render visible, to bring into appearance, the "fragments, traces, bits of evidence" from which it stands aside and through which it can only be "suggested": the plane, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, as the "development of forms" (*TP*, 265). The actual images that make up van der Keuken's films, the Real as the necessarily "ungiven," the plane of immanence developed and organized into forms, are the actuals in their inextricability from the "cloud of virtual images" that surrounds them and that are absorbed into them. In Deleuze's later formulation:

The plane of immanence includes both the virtual and its actualization simultaneously, without there being any assignable limit between the two. The actual is the complement or the product, the object of actualization, which has nothing but the virtual as its subject. Actualization belongs to the virtual. The actualization of the virtual is singularity whereas the actual is individuality constituted. ("A/V," 149-50)

By confounding or, in effect, displacing the distinction between the real and the imaginary, the actual and the virtual, especially in the case of "crystal-images" in which the distinction cannot be discerned, the "evocative, often disturbing

images” of van der Keuken’s films fundamentally call into question, if they do not simply defy, any clear-cut distinction between fiction and documentary film.

Clearly, the many faces we see in *Face Value*, a film that revolves around the face and sight, can to some extent be connected to pre-existing social realities, dependent on whether one is (or thinks one is) familiar with the “typical” facial features of French, German, British, and Czech people, and or speaks or recognizes their respective languages. At the same time, however, the way these images of faces appear, actualize themselves, and thus operate on the viewer undercuts their function as signs. Some of the faces come oddly, sometimes awkwardly into view, for instance, the German-speaking construction worker whose face is gradually reduced to his moving mouth, then merely to one corner of his mouth, while the camera zooms in and moves unsteadily across its surface, as if it were mapping out its various parts until the image is all but fully abstract—an effect that is enhanced by the soundtrack in which the man’s voice is struggling to be heard against the background noise of the machines working the site.

Or the toothless, smiling face of the older (French? Czech?) woman at a dance at what appears to be a local bar; shifting back and forth between her nimbly moving feet and close-ups of her face, the images do not so much reflect the lack of dental care in certain parts of Europe at a certain moment in history, or the ravaging effects of time on the human face, as they express joy, the intensity of movement, of sociality, of bodies moving together. *Face Value*, in the words of the filmmaker himself, is a “film which combines minute preparation with openness, thought with action. It presents a set of different positions within a field of relations, that could be called ‘Europe,’ an imaginary and partial Europe located between London, Marseille, Prague and the Netherlands.”³² The imaginary nature of this geographical location is equally strikingly perceptible in the sequence of the Dutch-speaking man talking about his childhood; the speaker is an ordinary-looking forty-something white man whose gaze is persistently turned away from the unmoving camera so that our gaze, too, appears to shift toward the imaginary winter landscape that he appears to envisage and that his words invoke.

The second aspect of van der Keuken’s reflections upon the Real of his films compounds such defiance on the level at which Rancière addresses the distinction between fiction and documentary film, the level of the viewer or spectator. It thereby additionally evokes Wiesing’s phenomenological celebration of the image, its singularity as the medium that alone can make the artificial presence of things possible. The filmmaker’s insistence on the role of the viewer as an “active *subiectum*” (Bakhtin) in the process of aesthetic co-creation furthermore confirms that such images can only do their work, react upon the actual if they are subject to a process of derealization. These joint emphases, on the necessity for

the derealization of images in order to prove their “reality” or their “artificiality,” and the non- or asymbolic operation of film, are nowhere more pronounced (and disturbing) than in van der Keuken’s treatment of the face, even if *Face Value* is “also a film about photography” in which the filmmaker has “portrayed not only faces, but also spaces and words.”³³

The human face can, according to Levinas, only signify, totally and exclusively, self-referentially. For even if the face for Levinas, we recall, is a “source from which all meaning appears,” it is emphatically *not* the site of meaning itself. This self- or auto-referentiality means that expression is the signification of the face, but it is a signification that cannot be contained or possessed, captured in the chains of symbolization. Seen as such, the face as a site of expression rather than of meaning essentially breaks through the classic system of signification and thus focuses, par excellence, the inherent ambivalence of the visual organization of the real. As an aesthetic event, van der Keuken’s *Face Value* does not so much show, but expresses such ambivalence.

For Levinas the face is a “living presence; it is expression.”³⁴ In its unspeakable expressiveness, the face constitutes its own signification, but, as suggested, it is a signification that does not enter the familiar Peircian model of the sign as *representamen*, that is, the face is not “something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.”³⁵ The face does not express itself by any measure or quality, but “καθ’αυτο,” “in itself.” The “face of the Other,” Levinas hence proposes, “at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and the measure of its *ideatum*—the adequate idea.” In other words, in breaking through “all the envelopings and generalities of Being,” the face not only “expresses itself,”³⁶ but also, and this is what essentially defines it, escapes the power of the signifier: the face “resists possession” and is “present in its refusal to be contained.”³⁷ Deleuze, too, describes the face as “expression, expression of affectivity or the emotional quality of a situation, a virtual disposition to act, potency waiting to become act.”³⁸ The critical difference, however, between Levinas’s and Deleuze’s respective characterizations of the face in terms of expression is that the former addresses actual human faces, whereas Deleuze, having begun his detailed theorization of the human face, as we have seen, in his collaborative work with Guattari, in *Cinema One: The Movement-Image*, directs his (and thus our) attention to the face in cinema, the face framed, the face in close-up.

In his preface to the English edition of this book, his first on film, Deleuze explains that his main concern is neither to present a history of cinema nor to engage with technical, critical, or linguistic cinematographic concepts, but to “isolate” concepts that allow us to identify under what conditions certain “types of images” and the “signs which correspond to them” can be identified

and defined. Assuming the image of the cinema generally to be “‘automatic’ and presented primarily as movement-image,” he differentiates three types of cinematic movement-images: the perception-image, the affection-image, and the action-image. It is the second of these image types that Deleuze correlates with the close-up and the face; indeed, he opens his chapter on the affection-image as follows: “*The affection-image is the close-up, and the close-up is the face.*” (CI, ix). Just as Levinas does with respect to the actual human face, Deleuze suggests that the face in/as close-up does not function within the terms of traditional signifying systems or forms of representation, which function according to a certain internal or intentional logic. The face/close-up does not hide some underlying meaning, nor does it function as a part for the whole: we cannot infer the entire person, or the meaning of the person, or even of the face itself from the image. The face/close-up expresses, but what it expresses is not something other than itself; it is not the visible/perceptual representation of something hidden or unseen, something it, in and of itself, is not. On the contrary, Deleuze maintains, the close-up of the face is not something that stands for something else, but rather abstracts something from all spatiotemporal coordinates, and that something is affect: “The affect is the entity, that is Power or Quality. It is something expressed.” In the face/close-up, powers and qualities are not actualized, “embodied in states of things”—in which case we would be dealing with the action-image—but “considered for themselves, as expressed” (CI, 97).

In explaining the difference between these two opposed modalities of powers and qualities, Deleuze draws on C. S. Peirce’s distinction between “firstness” and “secondness.” The latter refers to what is in relation to something or someone else; it is the realm of the Real, of individuation, of actuality and existence, the domain “where the action-image is born.” Firstness, in contrast, is a “totally different category, which refers to another type of image with other signs.” Firstness is hard to define, because it primarily exists as something that is felt, not conceived, and it “concerns what is new in experience, what is fresh, fleeting and nevertheless eternal.” Peirce’s examples of firstness include, in Deleuze’s gloss, “qualities or powers considered for themselves, without reference to anything else, independently of any question of their actualisation. It is that which it is for itself and in itself.” Firstness is not, or not yet, a feeling or sensation, but the “quality of a possible sensation, feeling, or idea.” As the category of the possible, firstness “expresses the possible without actualising it,” and this is, for Deleuze, “exactly what the affection-image is: it is quality or power, it is potentiality considered for itself as expressed” (CI, 98).

To be sure, within this Peircian-Deleuzian model, any set of images is made up of “firstnesses, secondnesses and many other things besides,” but it is the face/close-up—the affection-image “in the strict sense”—that “only refers to firstness”

(CI, 98). At this point, the difference between Levinas's focus on the human face and Deleuze's concern with the cinematic face in and as close-up, despite their shared emphasis on the face-sign as expression, becomes particularly relevant to my purposes here. As we have seen, Deleuze ascribes to the human face the three functions of individuation, socialization, and communication. In the case of the close-up, however, the face loses all three of these ordinary roles. The "primary originality and the distinctive quality of the cinema," in the words of director Ingmar Bergman, the master of close-ups whom Deleuze quotes approvingly, is the "possibility of drawing near to the human face,"³⁹ to the extent that the functions of the face in their secondness, their significance in the Real disappear; those aspects of the face that achieve actualization, and hence get caught up in the system of signification and that "presuppose a state of things where people act and perceive," dissolve, evaporate in the affection image (CI, 99).

In the close-up, the face is, but it has lost all its signifying functions; suspending individuation, socialization, and communication, the close-up transforms the face into a nothingness, a nakedness, a phantom, an expression of the possible without actualization. This quality, the *quale* of the face/close-up in cinema is what Deleuze calls "affection" or affect. And the affect, he maintains, is "impersonal and . . . distinct from every individuated state of things: it is nonetheless *singular*." In its singularity, which we recall is the "actualization of the virtual," but not the actual as "individually constituted" ("A/V," 150), the face/close-up confronts us with its firstness, with "what is new in experience" (CI, 98). It expresses a power considered for itself, "without reference to anything else," which is no less than to say that the paradox of the face in and as close-up finds its limit in the "effacement of faces in nothingness" (CI, 101). It is precisely this irreducible ambivalence at the heart of the image of the face, the cinematic production of the face as both the site of individuation (in the domain of the action-image) and of the face/close-up (the affection-image), with its singular power to efface, that van der Keuken, in all of his films but particularly in *Face Value*, is both haunted by, and relentlessly, perhaps obsessively, pursues.

As we have seen, van der Keuken is intensely aware of the "annihilating" operation of the sequential movement of images in film, which to some extent accounts for (and amplifies) his sense of the "necessity/desire/temptation to *reframe*" and for his films to qualify for Bergala as the "art of anxiety."⁴⁰ Deleuze's conceptualization of cinema as consisting of both movement-image and time-images and his elaboration on their different types allow me to think through the interconnections between the photographer/filmmaker's preoccupation with, on one hand, the human face and, on the other, the cinematic procedure of framing, deframing, and reframing.

Several critics have commented on van der Keuken's idiosyncratic framing

practice. Bergala, for instance, suggests that in his “anxiety” to somehow “wrong” the visible world by arbitrarily sectioning it, by framing his images, and thus curtailing the infinity of the “body of reality,” the filmmaker invented his “unframed’ pictures, which have since become famous.” On Bergala’s view, this deframing technique is a “relativization made visible of the act of framing,” which allows van der Keuken to sidestep the authoritative act of imposing meaning, of impaling visual reality, and, therefore, of “doing violence to the world.”⁴¹ A similar approach to the filmmaker’s deframing techniques is offered by Irish film scholar Des O’Rawe. In his essay “Cinema Lucida: Johan van der Keuken and the Meaning of Loss,” O’Rawe claims that van der Keuken’s “narrative patterns and deframing techniques, ‘free-form’ camera movement, and abstract colour and sound configurations” have less to do with conscious decisions than that they are a “more direct expression of his uncertainties about the possibility of ever framing and representing the world as it is, and was.”⁴² Although helpful in and of themselves, at least to the extent that one might try to make “sense” of van der Keuken’s films, these approaches ultimately do not satisfy. This is partly because they inevitably land us back, if not in the world, then at least in the domain of representation and symbolization. This, it will be clear, would be an unaccountably reductive move, for as O’Rawe himself quite rightly submits, the filmmaker’s use of “harsh contrasts of colour and sound . . . can unsettle a seemingly realistic representation and disturb the natural flatness of the image, accentuating movement, plasticity, and instability.” Partly, and for me more importantly in view of my overall concerns in this chapter, because such approaches do not adequately account for the operation of the face, the face in and as close-up, in its specificity as the affection-image par excellence, and for the ways in which it is framed, deframed, and reframed, in the reality—or indeed the artificiality—of van der Keuken’s films. To suggest a possible way to think the “problematic” of the framing of the affection-image, I return to Deleuze’s concept of the time-image, or “crystal-image,” as discussed in connection with the actual/virtual distinction, and I foreground its difference from and interrelations with the movement-image.

Deleuze associates the movement-image and its three types (action, perception, affection) primarily with prewar, classical (Hollywood) cinema as it is realized, following a sensory-motor schema, as montage: a perception is followed by an action. The movement-image functions within a certain (chrono)logical order, according to a clear narrative procession, and with linear references and incisions. Movement-images refer to each other and to the whole of spatial configuration, making a clear distinction between past and present, situation and response/action. Time-images, in contrast, which Deleuze relates to the introduction of new forms of postwar cinema (e.g., Italian neorealism and French *nouvelle vague*), do not proceed by any (chrono)logical order or by the narratological representa-

tion of actions and reactions. Breaking with the sensory-motor linkage of the movement-image, the time-image makes the distinction between the present and the past, and between the actual and the virtual, indiscernible. Various levels of duration coincide in the time-image, which thus dissolves the homogeneous structure of the movement-image and its linear spatiotemporal configuration to open onto the imaginary. Most films contain both general types of images, even if one of them may overdetermine the film as whole. What distinguishes the movement-image from the time-image is their respective spatial renderings of time. Yet whatever the nature of the image, and irrespective of its specific effects, every image is constituted by an in-between, an interval; in the movement-image, the interval is occupied by affection, “surg[ing] in the centre of indetermination” (CI, 65), between perception and action. In the time-image, it is something that comes from outside the narrational, linear set, a “coexistence of distinct durations, or of levels of duration” (CI, xi) that are juxtaposed between images to form a nonrepresentable multiplicity, levels of duration that cannot be reconciled and that render the distinction between the actual and the virtual indiscernible.

Van der Keuken’s *Face Value* presents us—or perhaps more accurately, violently and relentlessly confronts us—with the disruptive force of the interval, with the two types of interval specific to the two types of images Deleuze develops in his theory of cinema. In their primary function as affection-images, in-between the “two limit-facets, perceptive and active” of the movement-image, the faces/close-ups occupy the interval “without filling it in or filling it up” (CI, 65). Defying traditional frameworks of intelligibility and collapsing the Platonic dualisms of surface and depth, of appearances and reality, the face in and as close-up is present not as representation of something else, nor as expressions of another feeling or idea, but as expression in itself. The multiplicity of faces in *Face Value* are hence not to be “read” or *understood*, whether as, pace the Arte.tv sales department, an “epic on cultural diversity,” or as, in van der Keuken’s own words, a “certain combination of signs.” As *images* in the broad sense suggested by Elsaesser, that is, including words, sound, and movement, they demand to be approached or experienced as pure quality or affect, as the expression of potentiality without actualization.

In its function as a kind of zero degree of signification per se—as an aesthetic event, the locus of a prehension—it is the face/close-up in the interval that is the affection-image. It “surges in the centre of indetermination,” the effacement of faces in nothingness, that possesses the quality of “firstness,” whose substance is what Deleuze calls the “compound affect of desire and astonishment” (CI, 65). It is this “compound affect,” equally evoked by the frog-faced and fish-faced footmen in *Alice* and by van der Keuken’s face/close-ups in us as spectators/perceivers, that renders Rancière’s firm distinction between fiction and documentary—a distinc-

tion, we recall, that hinges on the genres' respective treatment of the real as an effect to be produced and as a fact to be understood—particularly unhelpful for an appreciation of van der Keuken's films, if it not altogether theoretically untenable. The faces populating van der Keuken's un/framed images, in their ultimate *indifférence*, which paradoxically gives them their life and their singularity, are not representations of something else, and they have no underlying depth or ulterior meaning. While extracted from and organizing reality, they are images, presenting things as exclusively visible: "All they can do is show." But what they can never show, what necessarily remains hidden, is the plane of immanence, that which the filmmaker himself calls the Real, the "hidden principle, which makes visible what is seen and audible what is heard," but which can only be "inferred, induced, concluded" from their in-betweens ("A/V," 49).

The other type of interval, the interval of the time-image, which occasionally converges with the interval constituted by the affection-image in *Face Value*, is equally crucial for the ways van der Keuken's films both warn us about taking what we see on the screen at face value and force us to feel, rather than conceive, the *dévisage*, the "effacement of faces in nothingness" (CI, 101). Defying the conventions of linear, narrative storytelling, juxtaposing sequences that "disrupt the texture of the film with sudden discontinuities, distractions, and detours"⁴³ and adopting a self-conscious method of (sometimes ludicrous) framing, pacing, and editing the faces of his subjects in their unspeakable expressiveness—as Bergala points out, the filmmaker "sometimes used the term 'excision' to describe what was in his eyes the ontologically aggressive nature of the act of framing"⁴⁴—*Face Value* equally deploys "false continuity and irrational cuts" that define the interval of the time-image (C2, xi).

In the preface to the English edition of *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze states, "What is specific to the image, as soon as it is creative, is to make perceptible, to make visible, relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present" (C2, xii). This is, I think, what is essential to van der Keuken's idiosyncratic cinematic practice, as much as it explains and validates his rejection of the distinction between documentary and fiction film. Stripped of their three ordinary functions of individuation, socialization, and communication, the face-images in *Face Value* show rather than tell us something about the possibility of meaning and being, or indeed about nonmeaning and nonbeing. In their inherent ambivalence, their presentness as aesthetic events, as intervals, these face/close-ups do not so much document anything at all, but rather constitute a critique of that founding distinction between appearance and reality, between surface and depth, between animal-face and liveried body, between creation and understanding, between the real and the artificial: distinctions they at once inscribe and dis-

solve. As such, they simultaneously fix and transcend the limits of perceptible reality and restore that which has been “portioned out” in the *partage de sensible* to the “infinite equivalence of becoming.” Opening onto the imaginative, van der Keuken’s films enable the emergence of the “new” and expose us to what is “fresh, fleeting, and nevertheless eternal,” and they can only do so in the event of our viewing experience, in the process of “derealization” that proves the image’s reality, or its artificiality.