The Ears of Hermes

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Face to Face in Ancient Rome

The Vocabulary of Physical Appearance in Latin

On several occasions, Jean-Pierre Vernant has guided us through the world of images and imitations within ancient Greek culture. At the same time, the studies of Françoise Frontisi have permitted us to understand how the Greeks unified in a single image—*to prosōpon*—two notions that remain distinct in our culture: the mask and the face.¹ With regard to ancient Roman culture, however, very little has been said along these lines, although the Romans had to confront problems similar to those faced by the Greeks: on one hand, the need to define what images are; one the other, the need to describe themselves and their own appearance. In this chapter, I would like begin sketching out a possible “anthropology of physical appearance” in the Roman world. To do so, we will focus primarily on the words used in Latin to describe a person’s appearance.

Two preliminary remarks. First: in this as in so many other cases, we will be dealing with cultural representations that are not entirely coherent. In other words, the terms and cultural models that we are about to examine do not fit neatly into a single, internally consistent “theory”: there is no single, overarching representation of the face or physical appearance that accommodates every mode of representation employed by the Romans.

¹. The contributions of Vernant and Frontisi towards this topic may be found in different places, beginning with Vernant 1975; Vernant and Frontisi 1983, 53–69; Vernant 1975, 31–58; Frontisi 1988, on which see Vernant 1995, 310–15; and Frontisi 1991b, 131–58. see also Vernant 1988, 211–32.
Indeed, the terminology that refers to physical appearance is a frequently shifting field, suggesting different metaphorical possibilities and different expressive “intentions.” (This is the same principle we observed in Roman cultural representation of time and physical space, with their corresponding vocabulary). Sometimes perspectives on the face and “person” change and nothing dictates that these perspectives will be of the same order, or that they will interact on the same level. However, this is probably something we should expect from any cultural configuration of broad relevance and wide-ranging significance within a society.

Second: The question of physical appearance and above all of the “face” should not be reduced to a simple problem of anatomy. A person’s face, countenance, physique and build are meaningful in ways far beyond their intrinsic “natural” significance, so to speak. These features of the human body have an extremely specific cultural value. Taken together, they form a fundamental aspect of “the person”: its identity. In fact, the ability to recognize someone (to be able to say, “This is Gaius”) and the ability to be recognized (to be able to say, “I am Titius,” and being accepted as such) both depend to a great degree on physical appearance. This is particularly true of ancient societies, where methods of identification we take for granted today—pictures, identification cards, passports, fingerprints and even DNA—did not exist. As a result, when we consider how the ancient Romans “saw” someone’s appearance, face and physique, we cannot separate the analysis of these terms from the anthropological and cultural problem par excellence, identity.

Aspect and Sight

So let us see. Vernant and Frontisi have surely taught us how to look at the Greeks “face to face.” For the Greeks, the face—to prosōpon—was something above all subject to sight. Better yet, it was something designated by a term derived directly from “sight” (op-). In defining this vitally important part of the body, the Greeks valorized a relationship between “seeing” and simultaneously “being seen”: to prosōpon is the “face to face” presence of an individual who, in order to define his own identity, models himself on others in a relationship of complete visual reciprocity. The same tendency to understand the face in terms of “sight” is apparent also in the terms ops or eidos, both derived from the roots related to “seeing” and once again

3. Even if the two fields coincide in part: this explains why some, though not all of the terms that we will analyze here have been dealt with also by André 1991, 27ff.
used to designate a person’s physical appearance. Equally interesting is the Greek expression *dusōpia*, literally “bad face,” signifying an excess of shame or deference. Plutarch dedicated one of the essays in his *Moralia* to this personality defect. In his definition, *dusōpia* is a kind of exaggerated shyness “that reaches the point of not being able to look someone in the eye (*antiblepein*) when they ask for something.”

Even in the case of excessive timidity, then, the face (-*ōpia*) is involved; here, in the reciprocal exchange of gazes—the act of *antiblepein*—one actually loses face. It is clear that in Greece “the face” was defined by and perceived within the sphere of visual interaction. We may then ask how the Romans and how the Latin language responded to this same problem.

In Latin, too, there was an important term denoting physical appearance taken from the field of “sight” and “seeing”: *species*. This substantive was derived from the same root that also appears in the rare verb *specio* (“to watch, observe”) as well as in its many compound forms (e.g., *respecio, conspicio, perspicio*), the nouns *speculum* (“mirror”) and *specula* (“look-out point”) and so on. *Species* could signify the ability “to see,” but it is rare in this sense.

Far more often, it meant “appearance” (the capacity “to be seen.”) In this second sense, *species* covers an enormous field of reference, ranging from “appearance” in the most general sense (of people or things), to “apparition,” “image” (natural or artificial), “beauty” and the philosophical “species.” The range of meanings covered by *species* includes that of Greek *eidōlon* and *eidos* (which the Latin word regularly translates), but extends far beyond these more narrowly defined Greek terms. *Species* is a term of very broad application, therefore, and is not limited by any means to a person’s face or individual features. And so it cannot be the term we are after, at least if we are trying to understand what is distinctive about the Roman definition of “the face” and “appearance.”

Likewise in the case of *aspectus*, another word belonging to the family of *specio*. *Aspectus* is properly derived from *aspicio* (“to look”) and has both the active sense of “look” or “gaze” and the passive sense of “appearance.” Once again, we find a “visual” term not limited specifically to “the face” or “countenance,” but to “appearance” in the most general sense (of things, people or animals). In fact, it is interesting to note that when reference is made to the appearance of the face, the single term *aspectus* does not suffice: a hendiadys

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4. Plut. *De vit. pud.* 1.528e.
such as *aspectus et os* or *vultus et aspectus* must be used.\(^9\) This demonstrates that *aspectus* by itself is inadequate for indicating the human face. It meant “appearance” in a very general sense: “being looked at” or “the ability to be looked at”—understood as a kind of quality belonging to all visible objects, not only to the human face. In this sense, the range of meanings attributed to *aspectus* is quite similar to that of *species*.\(^10\)

In light of the vocabularies of the Romance languages, we might reasonably have hoped to discover something more specific in the visual sphere. Words like Italian *viso* and French *visage* suggest that the Romans, like the Greeks, privileged the visual dimension in their definition of the face by referring to it with the word *visus*. But this would be an error of perspective: in Latin, the term *visus* was used in the strict sense of “the ability to see” or, passively, the “vision” that one sees. It never meant “face.” The face as “sight,” as something that can “look” and “be looked at” at the same time, is evidently a cultural model that postdates classical Latin.\(^11\) How did the Romans characterize the face, then? Put another way, what did the Romans “see” when they looked at each other, face to face?

### A Face That Speaks

An answer is not far to seek: above all, the Romans saw a mouth. The word *os* is the most common expression in Latin for “the face,” and comparative evidence within Indo-European shows that the primary meaning of *os* is “mouth.”\(^12\) The Latin word *os* in the sense of “face” is a metonymic extension of the word’s original meaning, then. In Benveniste’s terminology, we could say that Latin derives the designation “face” from its signification “mouth.” But why this choice precisely?

### The Mouth That Speaks and the Mouth That Eats

Anatomically speaking, the mouth is certainly an important part of the face. However, it is not the only important part of the face, and it is not neces-

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\(^10\) The close relationship between the two terms was clearly felt by the Romans: cf. Aul. Gell. *NA* 13.30, *ab aspectu species et a fingendo figura*.

\(^11\) Blaise 1954, s.v. records the sense of “face” for *visus* in *Itinerarium a Burdigala Hierusalem usque*, p. 20, 15 (4th c. C.E.).

sarily the part of the face that first catches our attention. If *os* eventually comes to occupy the entire semantic space of “the face,” overshadowing all other facial features, the explanation must lie more in the cultural value of *os* than in the purely anatomical meaning of the “mouth.” In Latin, *os* has strong connotations; it evokes a capacity that chiefly distinguishes human beings from other animate creatures: language.\(^{13}\) For Latin speakers, the connection between *os* and words such as *oro* or *orator* was probably immediately recognizable.\(^{14}\) But even ignoring etymological speculation, such common idioms as *in ore esse* (“to be much spoken of”), *uno ore* (“by general agreement”) and *aperire ora* (“to speak”) leave little doubt about the relationship between *os* and *oro*. Likewise the great number of passages in which *os* is used in the sense of “discourse, speech,” “the sound of the voice” or “pronunciation.”\(^{15}\)

*Os* is first and foremost “speech.”\(^{16}\) We may suggest, therefore, that for the Romans “the face” corresponded to the mouth insofar as it manifested the ability to speak. The mouth is the speaking part of the face. As such, it overshadowed everything else in defining “facial appearance.” The specifically “verbal” value of the human face becomes clearer if we compare *os* with the word in Latin used to designate an animal’s “snout” or “beak”: *rostrum*. The term *rostrum* was also originally used simply of the mouth, but was almost “invasively” extended to indicate the rest of the face. But to what kind of “mouth” does the word *rostrum* refer? Derived from the verb *rodo* (“to chew”), *rostrum* is therefore “the mouth that eats.” *Rostrum* is the mouth insofar as it “chews” (*rodit*).\(^ {17}\) In other words, an animal’s mouth is exclusively an organ destined to chew food. Animals are considered dumb beasts, which know only how to eat and nothing more. For this reason, their facial appearance is understood exclusively in terms of “eating.”\(^ {18}\) This is not the case with human beings. The human mouth stands for the whole face

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13. See, e.g., Cic. *Leg.* 1.9.27, *moderationem vocis, orationis vim, quae conciliatrix est humanae maxime societatis.*


18. In cases of comic, familiar, or joking language where *rostrum* is used to indicate a man’s face, the “eating” characteristic of this type of ‘mouth’ is made explicitly obvious: cf., e.g., Plaut. *Men.* 89, *apud mensam plenam homini rostrum deliges.* Elsewhere what is emphasized is the gross and animal-like nature of the *rostrum*, as at Lucilius fr. 1121 Marx, *baronum ac rupicum [= rusticorum] squarrosa, incondita rostra.* On the fact that *rostrum* (according to *consuetudo*) was a word considered inappropriate for designating a man’s face, but was in any case used for this purpose in particular contexts, see the evidence of Non. Marcell. *De comp. doctr.* 455ff. Lindsay.
because of its relationship with oratio and orator. Above all, the human mouth is a mouth that speaks.

**Identity in Walking and Talking**

Representations and terms that define bodily appearance cannot be separated from their cultural content—that is, from their capacity to define identity. It will be opportune to recall, therefore, that, in general, the voice and speech play a decisive role in defining identity, as well. To observe this process, we will have to look at some moments when someone’s identity is put into crisis, since uncertainty tends to bring to light the (usually tacitly understood) features used in identification. In general, these are stories of duplicates or “doubles,” in which someone falsely assumes another person’s identity, imitating that person’s physical features and other traits.

Morpheus, the god of dreams, could perform expert imitations of another’s figura in order to deceive dreamers. Ovid tells us:

non illo quisquam sollertius alter  
exprimit incessus vultumque sonumque loquendi;  
adicit et vestes et consuetissima cuique  
verba. . . .

No one was better than Morpheus at imitating someone’s gait, face, and the sound of their voice, as well as their clothes and most personal expressions.

Ovid’s description of “identity theft” is extremely interesting, since it reveals the specific elements that the Romans considered to be identifying features: the gait, the face and the sound of the voice. Below, we will consider the way in which the vultus was able to express someone’s identity and how the voice served as an instrument of identification. But now we may open a brief parenthesis to analyze another situation in which the gressus or incessus are listed as traits capable of defining identity.

In the first book of the Aeneid, Cupid adopts the likeness of Iulus to

19. Pliny (Nat. hist. 11.138) asserts that os was used not only for human beings but also for animals (facies homini tantum, ceteris os aut rostra); the same in Carisius, Grammatici Latini 390.28.13 Keil, vultus proprié hominis, os omnium. In actual fact, os is used very infrequently to designate the “face” of animals (cf. the passages in TLL IX, 2, 1089, 30–38 Zimmermann). Note that this often happens when an author is speaking of a human being transformed into an animal (Io) or of a divinity with animal-like features (Anubis) or of mythic beasts (Phoenix), etc.


better deceive Dido and make her fall in love with Aeneas. Here we see Cupid at work: *gressu gaudens incedit Iuli* (“he walks in happily with Iulus’ step”). It is interesting to observe that Iulus’ gait forms an inseparable part of the trick and Cupid’s alteration of identity. Likewise, the goddess Iris takes on the identity of the old woman Beroe, but is then unmasked by her *gressus*: evidently, Iris continued to walk with a goddess’ bearing, failing to fool anyone who observed her carefully. The gods, as we know, walk differently than mortals do: *vera incessu patuit dea* (“the goddess was revealed by her walk”), as Vergil says of Venus. Elsewhere, someone’s manner of walking serves as a way to express family identity, guaranteeing, for example, the relationship between father and son. Andromache, looking at her son Astyanax, sees in him the features of her dead husband: *hos vultus meus / habuit Hector, talis incessu fuit, habituque talis* (“this is the same face that my Hector had; this was his way of walking and his personality”). *Gressus* is also a factor involved in the creation of a “living ghost” (the typical expedient, since Homer’s *Iliad*, for rescuing a hero in distress). When Juno must fashion a “substitute” of Aeneas in order to fool Turnus, she begins with a creature formed of cloud and then *dat sine mente sonum gressusque effingit euntis* (“she gives him a voice without mind and she feigns Aeneas’ way of walking”).

But to return to the specific problem we were discussing: the power of the mouth and of speech in identifying someone. It is particularly interesting that Ovid’s Morpheus, master of counterfeit identities, is acquainted with the art of imitating not simply the “voice” but also the “most characteristic expressions of each person.” In identifying someone, all the components of the act of speaking play a role: vocal quality and lexical choice, as well as the most characteristic features of their diction. Recall that at Vespasian’s funeral “an archimimus named Favor depicted the emperor’s person and imitated his dress, what he did and what he said while he was alive.” Here, someone wishing to assume another person’s identity is concerned above all with reproducing their linguistic idiosyncrasies—just as Ovid’s Morpheus, in order to better deceive Halcyon, the wife of Ceyx, not only uses the dead man’s words, but also *adicit . . . vocem . . . quam coniugis illa / crederet esse sui* (“adds a voice that the woman would believe to be her husband’s”).

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27. Suet. *Vesp.* 19, in funere Favor archimimus personam eius ferens imitansque, ut est mos, facta ac dicta vivi. For the imitation of the voice in caricature, see below, n. 148.
Moreover, the *vox*, like the *incessus*, was capable of defining not only individual identity but also that of a family or group. Indeed, it could confirm that a person was an authentic member of a particular lineage: Lucretius, in a passage dealing with the “genetics” of resemblance, attributes to Venus the ability to reproduce in the descendants of a family line the *maiorumque . . . vultus, vocesque comasque* (“the face of their ancestors, their voice, and their hair”).

Someone’s way of speaking, therefore, with its phonetic peculiarities and individual lexical choices, was a powerful contribution to their identity. As Pliny said: *vox in homine magnam vultus habet partem. agnosceimus ea prius quam cernamus non aliter quam oculis* (“In man, the voice plays an important part in the face. By means of the voice, we are able to recognize someone before we even see them, recognizing someone as we do with our eyes”).

Someone’s voice makes them recognizable. It produces their identity. Very likely these are the cultural models that gave the face/mouth its meaning at Rome. With this term—*os*—the Romans designated “the face” not only by appealing to that most human capacity—language—but by evoking above all a “verbal quality” that made a major contribution to the definition of someone’s identity (in conjunction with the facial expression, the gait, and so on). Someone’s voice, their pronunciation of words and their typical expressions constituted a true and proper “speaking icon,” located in the face/mouth—the *os*.

In this perspective, comparing Roman with Greek culture becomes very interesting. As mentioned above, in the Greek world, what appears to be the decisive factor in defining the face is the visual component. For the Greeks, the face was *prosōpon*. For the Romans, on the other hand, the face was understood as a “mouth” and as “speech.” Pliny is explicit: “the voice plays an important part in the face.” In this light, the relationship that the Romans have with the *persona* (“mask”) seems indicative. *Persona* is, of course, the Latin equivalent of Greek *prosōpon*, which, as we have said, designates both “the face” and “mask.” The word *persona*, in fact, was associated with the verb *persono* (“I speak through, I resound”).

According to the interpretation of Gavius Bassus, *quoniam . . . indumentum illud oris clarescere et resonare vocem facit, ob eam causam persona dicta est* (“because this apparel for the face makes the voice clearer and more sonorous, it is called *persona*”).

For the Greeks, the mask—like the face—belonged in the dimension of *visuality*. For the Romans, it seems to have been instead a matter of *orality*.

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31. The relationship is obviously impossible due to the difference in quantity of the -o-.* Cf. Ernout-Meillet 1965, s.v. *persona*.
Once again, in order to define someone’s “facial identity,” Roman culture valued the act of speaking above that of seeing. “The mask” was conceived as an object that made sound, just as the face was a “mouth” and the voice identified the face. At Rome, identity was conveyed above all by the act of speaking. Servius declared this explicitly: people, he said, “recognize each other by means of their speech (se sermone cognoscunt).”

**An Interior Face**

In addition to *os*—“the face that speaks”—another word, and the cultural dimension it represents, is crucial to the description of “appearance” at Rome: *vultus*. In many cases, this word functions simply as a synonym of *os*, denoting “the face.” Elsewhere, a difference between the words *vultus* and *os* is perceptible. Livy, for example, describes Appius Claudius’ intransigence like this: *idem habitus oris, eadem contumacia in vultu* (“he did not change the expression of his *os*, he did not change the haughtiness of his *vultus*”).

If, as regards *os*, Livy emphasizes the immutability of the man’s general expression (the *habitus* of his face), his description as regards *vultus* underscores the presence of an emotion—the arrogance characteristic of the Claudii—that finds expression in the face. Our analysis of what *vultus* meant to the ancient Romans will focus on this, then: the expression of “interiority.”

**An Interior Face That the Greeks Do Not Have**

Cicero demonstrates himself particularly proud of the word *vultus*, when he writes: *is, qui appellatur vultus, qui nullo in animante esse praeter hominem potest, indicat mores, cuius vim Graeci norunt, nomen omnino non habent* (“this thing that is called vultus and which is not found in any creature except human beings, indicates a person’s character: the Greeks understand what the vultus is, but they have no corresponding word for it whatsoever”).

According to Cicero, animals do not have a *vultus*, it being exclusive to human beings. Moreover, the Greeks did not have a word adequate for

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33. Servius Auctus in *Ecl.* 4.60, *sicut enim maiores se sermone cognoscunt, ita infantes parentes risu se indicant agnoscere*. The reference is to the theme of recognition between the newborn and his parents, which, according to tradition, was supposed to happen through the “laugh.”


35. Cic. *Leg.* 1.9.27.

36. Cicero seems to be correct. In fact, in the few cases that *vultus* is used for animals, it is really a matter of human beings transformed into animals: Verg. *Aen.* 7.20 (men changed into animals by Circe); Ov. *Fast.* 2.177ff. (Callisto changed into a bear); Sen. *Oed.* 761 (Acteon changed into a
expressing the meaning conveyed by Latin *vultus*. This is precious comparative evidence that Greek authors seem to confirm, at least indirectly. Aristotle, for example, says that a corpse cannot have a true and proper *prosôpon* except through a kind of homonymy, since “there is no *prosôpon* if there is no *psuchê*.” It is difficult to shake off the impression that Aristotle is struggling from a lack of terminology, since he is compelled to employ a single word to describe both the living and expressive face of a human being (the person endowed with a *psuchê*) and the dead and inexpressive face of a cadaver.\(^\text{37}\)

Not so with the Latin *vultus*, which, at least according to Cicero, encompasses a very specific semantic and cultural space: *vultus . . . indicat mores*. The *vultus* is a vehicle for expressing personality traits and internal emotions. Servius even maintains that *vultus . . . pro mentis qualitate formatur* (“the *vultus* is shaped in accordance with the quality of the soul”).\(^\text{38}\) The grammarian Eugraphius clarifies the point when he says that *vultus . . . animi motu facies ad tempus aptata* (“the *vultus* . . . is the face assumed according to the motions of the soul”).\(^\text{39}\) Isidore, with his etymological vision of culture, links the origin of the word *vultus* to the word *voluntas*, of which the *vultus* would then be an external manifestation.\(^\text{40}\) In expressing someone’s *voluntas*, the *vultus* is assigned the task of expressing the emotions of the soul (Incidentally, this is a derivation that some modern scholars have tried to revive from time to time).\(^\text{41}\) Quintilian is also quite explicit. In fact, as the professor of rhetoric explains, the *caput* plays a determining role in *actio*, especially as regards *significatio*.\(^\text{42}\) And within the *caput* (itself such an important part of the human body)

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dominatur autem maxime vultus. hoc supplices, hoc minaces, hoc blandi . . . sumus, hoc pendent homines, hunc intuentur, hic spectatur etiam antequam dicimus: hoc quosdam amamus, quosdam odimus, hoc plura intellegimus, hic est saepe pro omnibus verbis.
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the *vultus* is the most important part. By means of the face we beseech, we threaten, we appear innocuous. . . . Men rely on this, this is what they look at and this is what is looked at before someone even begins to speak. Because

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38. Serv. in *Aen.* 1.683.
of the face, we love some people, while we hate others; it is by means of
the face that we understand many things, and the face is often worth more
than all the words taken together.

The *vultus* is the central focus of interpersonal communication. This part of
the head becomes a locus of hints and signs, to the point of functioning as
a true and proper “language” that people can use to decipher the feelings
and intentions at work in another person's soul.

This situation has a number of interesting consequences. In particular,
it confirms our idea that, in addition to *os*, there was a word in Latin refer-
ring to the face directly related to the sphere of interiority. The word *vultus*
designated someone's external appearance in relation to the internal—not
only as “the 'face,” but also as a vehicle for their *mores* and *mens*. *Vultus*
was an expression of the soul. For this reason, Latin *vultus* can be used both in
the singular and plural to refer to an individual's face: *vultus* is not a fixed
“image” but a changing expression. In fact, *vultus* designates a set of disposi-
tions connected with something that is variable by nature: the “inner life” of
the person. Cicero, in a letter to Cornificius, commends Cherippus for not
only reporting Cornificius’ emotions and words to him, but describing his
individual expressions in detail: *vultus mehercule tuos mihi expressit omnes,
non solum animum ac verba pertulit* (“he has truly revealed all the expressions
of your face [“the faces which you make,” he might have said], in addition
to sharing your feelings and your words”).

As the expression of internal emotions, the *vultus* is necessarily “shift-
ing.” Recommending that the orator avoid a defect of voice and appearance
the Greeks called *monotonia*, Quintilian makes the following observation:
*nonne ad singulas paene distinctiones, quamvis in eadem facie, tamen quasi
vultus mutandus est?* (“even if the face remains the same, should there not
be variety for each portion of the speech, changing like the *vultus*?”). The
*vultus* is supposed to modulate the *facies* in a potentially infinite series
of expressions whose variety reinforces and comments upon the speech, accord-
ing to its development, transitions and nuances. The *facies* does not change,
however. The *vultus* is mutable and, as such, poses a number of problems
for literary description, as may well be imagined. Literary texts often have
the task of representing—by means of the written word—the various expres-

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43. The use of the plural of *vultus* is specifically underscored by Quintilian (*Inst. orat.* 8.6.28)
in his discussion of figures: *est etiam hic trope quaedam cum synecdoche vicinia; nam, cum dico vultus
hominis pro vultu, dico pluraliter quod singular est.*
44. Cic. *Ad fam.* 12.30.3.
45. Quint. *Inst. orat.* 11.3.47.
46. On this, see below, 148–49.
sions that people may assume as the external manifestation of what is in their souls. To do so, texts have no choice but to transform the shifting variability of the *vultus* into an equally varied series of adjectives. To take the tragedies of Seneca as only one example, there the word *vultus* is accompanied by over twenty different adjectives.\(^{47}\)

As with *os*, so too with *vultus* a comparison with Greek culture is in order. This comparison is in fact suggested by a native informant—Cicero, who has already explained to us that the Greeks did not have a word corresponding to Latin *vultus*. A difference does exist between the two cultures: If in Greek “the face” (*to prosōpon*) is primarily “something for seeing,” in Latin *vultus* is something opposed to the dimension of visuality. The *vultus* is not something “to see,” but something “to infer.” The *vultus* does not presume an open gaze, but glimpses, glances and signs.

Once again Cicero helps us understand the meaning of *vultus* for the Romans. In forensic activity, he says, it is essential to cultivate a careful and scrupulous attention to detail (*diligentia*): *ut vultus . . . perspiciamus omnis, qui sensus animi plerumque indicant, diligentia est* (“diligence is being able to perceive all expressions [*vultus*], which generally reveals the feelings of the soul”).\(^{48}\) It is not enough simply to look (*re-spicere*) at the *vultus* in order to understand it; one must *per-spicere*—that is, employ a penetrating stare somehow capable of overcoming the barrier of exteriority. The prefix *pre-* is crucial. “The face” does not reveal itself to a superficial glance; instead, it requires visual penetration. The fact is, in the cultural configuration presupposed by the Latin word *vultus*, the face takes on a decidedly semiotic value, functioning as a collection of signs referring to the individual feelings of the conscience or to specific personality traits. The *vultus* is not an image to contemplate but a sign to interpret. Semiotically, inside comes out. The “face” in front of us, as the expression of an otherwise invisible internal condition, refers elsewhere. This is something very different from the visual immediacy of the Greek *prosōpon*.

In this light, it is not surprising that in the practice of physiognomy the analyst’s attention is attracted precisely to the *vultus*. In fact, in the physiognomic treatise of the so-called Anonymus Latinus, we read:

\[ \text{omnis vultus cum est plenus et crassus, ignavum significat et voluptatibus deditum, deductus cogitatorem, subdulum, timidum, astutum asseverat.} \]
\[ \text{vultus parvus parvum et angustum ingenium, enormis stultitiam et ignaviam testatur.} \]

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\(^{47}\) Trux, superbus, obscurus, pallens, dubius, subdolus, torvus, ferox, etc.

\(^{48}\) Cic. *De orat.* 2.148.

\(^{49}\) Anonymus Latinus, *De Physiognomonia* 50 (in Raina 1993).
Whenever the *vultus* is full and fleshy this means that the person is lazy and pleasure-seeking; when the face is thin and drawn-out, it indicates a thinker, someone who is tricky, shy and clever. A small face indicates a small and narrow character; a large face indicates stupidity and sloth.

In the corresponding section of the treatise attributed to Pseudo-Aristotle, the Greek text uses the word *prosōpon*. Cicero has already explained that the Greeks did not have a wide range of choices when it came to speaking about the face. Since the discussion involves unmistakably physical characteristics of the face (“fleshy” and “full,” “thin” and so forth), we may have expected the Latin text to employ *facies* instead of *vultus*. As we will describe below, *facies* designates the face as a “natural” set of features—the characteristics of its basic anatomical structure. Evidently for the anonymous author of the physiognomy, however, the kind of face that was interesting from the point of view of physiognomic analysis was *vultus*. In the Roman cultural tradition, it is *vultus* that fulfills the semiotic function of the face; it is *vultus* that is traditionally associated with the dialectic of inside/ outside and with externalizing the “inner world” through signs. At Rome, the physiognomists’ “face”—that is, the semiotic face—was, of course, the *vultus*.

**Vultus and Oculi: The Seat of the Soul**

We can now try to “locate” Latin *vultus* as we did earlier for *os*. If, for the Romans, “the face” (*os*) corresponded to the lower portion of the face where the mouth is located, *vultus* seems instead to involve the upper portion where the eyes are. In many cases, the word *vultus* appears to designate what we might call “visual capacity” and indeed also the eyes. Lucretius, enumerating a series of natural portents, tarries on the description of monstrous beings that lack mouths and eyes: *muta sine ore etiam, sine vultu caeca reperta* (“creatures that are silent without *os*, and blind without *vultus*”). The absence of *os* renders these monsters mute and their lack of *vultus* renders them blind. Undoubtedly, the word *vultus* means “eyes” here. So too in Seneca’s *Hercules Oetaeus*: Alcmena, in the final scene of the tragedy, confronts the apotheosis of Hercules and asks herself if what she has seen really is her son: *fallor an vultus putat / vidisse natum?* (“Am I mistaken or do my eyes (*vultus*) think that they have seen my son?”). Once again, *vultus* clearly

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51. See below, 151–54.
52. Lucr. *De re. nat.* 5.841.
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refers to the “sight” of the eyes. We may therefore conclude that when the Romans said *vultus*, they focused on the upper part of the face and not the lower (as when they said *os*). The face/mouth is therefore opposed to the face/eyes. But how is it that the eyes are involved in defining of the “face” of interiority?

The answer to this question is not unexpected. We need only recall the famous passage in which Pliny describes the powers of the eyes:

> neque ulla ex parte maiora animi indicia cunctis animalibus, sed homini maxime, id est miserationis, clementiae, odii. . . . profecto in oculis animus habitat. . . . animo autem videmus, animo cernimus: oculi ceu vasa quaedam visibilem eius partem accipiunt atque trasmittunt.\(^5\)

In all animals, but especially in human beings, there is no part of the body that conveys more signs of the state of the soul, that is, signs of sympathy, forgiveness, hatred. . . . There is no doubt that the soul resides in the eyes. . . . With the soul, we are able to see, we discern with the soul: but it is the eyes that receive and transmit this visual force, like vases.

The eyes, where the soul “resides,” are a kind of window between a person’s inside and outside—a privileged channel through which *indicia* are transmitted—making it possible for a person’s soul to be deciphered. This is why *vultus*, localized around the eyes, points precisely towards a person’s “interior,” serving as its means of signification. Quintilian explicitly confirms that, as part of the *vultus*, it is the eyes that act as the “window into the soul”: *in ipso vultu plurimum valent oculi, per quos maxime animus emanat* (“in the *vultus*, the eyes are most important; the soul emerges through the eyes most of all”).\(^5\)

**Vultus, Frons and Supercilia**

It is not quite correct to identify the *vultus* with the eyes, however, since the eyes do not appear to constitute the entire *vultus* in Roman culture. Cicero,

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54. The same happens with the hallucinations of Oedipus (Sen. *Phoen.* 42ff.) when he relives the horrible experience of being blinded in the form of an attack by his father’s ghost against his already hollow eyes: *en ecce, inanes manibus infestis petit / foditque vultus*.


56. Quint. *Inst. orat.* 11.3.75.
in the same passage where he praises the virtues of the word *vultus*, expressly distinguishes the eyes and *vultus*. The former are able to reveal *quem ad modum animo affecti simus*—i.e., our feelings—whereas the *vultus* “reveals the traits of our character (*indicat mores*).”\(^{57}\) *Vultus* and *oculi* are not exactly identical: rather, it seems that *vultus*, although localized in the eyes, can be identified more generally with the entire upper part of the face. Consider the way in which Cicero attacks Piso, condemning him for his deceptive and lying behavior towards his fellow citizens:

> oculi supercilia frons vultus denique totus, qui sermo quidam tacitus mentis est, hic in fraudem homines impulit, hic eos quibus erat ignotus decepit, feellit, induxit.\(^{58}\)

The eyes, the eyebrows, the forehead, in short, the entire *vultus*, which constitutes something like a silent language of the mind, is what has dragged the others into his trap; it is his *vultus* which has tricked them, deceiving and entangling those who were not familiar with the man.

Once again, the *vultus* is identified as a place of semiosis, where a person’s “interiority” is revealed—like a real, albeit soundless “language” of the mind. Yet the *vultus* consists not only of the eyes (although they are mentioned first), but also of two other significant parts of the face: the eyebrows and the forehead. In the Roman cultural tradition, these two parts of the body function as a kind of semiotic interface with a person’s “interiority,” just as the eyes do. In fact, the Romans considered the *frons* and the *supercilia* a source of expressive power. For example, Pliny tells us:

> frons et alii, sed homini tantum tristitiae, hilaritatis, clementiae, severitatis index. in assensu eius supercilia homini et pariter et alterna mobilia. et in his pars animi: negamus iis, annuimus. haec maxime indicant fastum, superbiam. aliubi conceptaculum, sed hic sedem habet; in corde nascitur, huc subit, hic pendet. nihil altius simul abruptiusque invenit in corpore, ubi solitaria esset.\(^{59}\)

Other animals also have a forehead, but only in human beings is the forehead able to indicate sadness, joy, pity, severity. In the moment of assent, the eyebrows move both in unison and alternately. A part of the soul also

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57. Cic. *Leg.* 1.26, *et oculi nimis argen*, *quem ad modum animo affecti simus, loquuntur, et is, qui appellatur vultus, qui nullo in animante esse praeter hominem potest, indicat mores.*


resides in the eyebrows: we use the eyebrows to deny something, we use the eyebrows to indicate assent. It is above all in the eyebrows that we can see pride and boastfulness. This feeling does not arise in the eyebrows, but the eyebrows are where it resides: it actually arises in the heart and from there it rises up and then hangs there in the eyebrows, because there is no other place in the body so steep and high, a place which that feeling of pride can have all to itself.

The forehead and the eyebrows are another, equally semiotic region of the human face. Like the eyes, these parts of the face can function as a kind of *index* revealing a person’s inner emotions. In fact, the communicative function of the *frons* (as of the eyes and the *vultus* more generally) is made clear in a number of proverbial expressions. The *supercilium* was also proverbial for being able to reveal involuntary impulses which could be read as divinatory signs. The word could also be used as a synonym for pride or severity, just as the adjective *superciliosus* could refer to an extremely severe or austere character. Pliny, in a passage dealing with physiognomy, refers explicitly to the signifying virtues of both the forehead and the eyebrows as means of assessing a person’s character from the features of his or her face. Quintilian, too, as a meticulous teacher of *actio*, carefully noted that *multum et supercilii agitur, nam et oculos formant aliquatenus et fronti imperant* (“a great deal happens in the eyebrows, because they mark out to a certain degree the shape of the eyes and they rule the forehead”). Quintilian’s testimony becomes all the more intriguing, however, when he describes the trick that comic actors employ better to express the emotions of the soul, despite the rigidity of the masks they wear:

pater ille, cuius praecipue partes sunt, quia interim concitatus interim lenis est, altero erecto altero composito est supercilio, atque id ostendere maxime latus actoribus moris est quod cum iis quas agunt partibus congruat.

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61. Cf. Plaut. *Pseud.* 107, *supercilium mihi salit*; Otto 1890, 335. See also the meaning that Pliny (*Nat. hist.* 11.145) attributes to *conivere*, or the action of “squinting the eyelids.”

62. Cf. e.g., Cic. *Leg. agr.* 2.93 and *Post red. in sen.* 7.16; etc.


65. Quint. *Inst. orat.* 11.3.78.

The father, who has the main role, is sometimes enraged and at other times is calm, so he has an eyebrow that is raised and an eyebrow that is lowered, and the actors turn the side of the mask to the audience that is better suited to the particular lines that they are reciting at the moment.

Codified in the tradition of the theatrical mask, the position of the eyebrow is a sign that instantaneously expresses an emotional state. By showing one side of the mask or the other—the angry side, with its eyebrow raised, or the calm side, with its eyebrow lowered—the actor uses the *supercilium* as a true and proper sign of the fixed polarities between which the comic *pater*’s emotional state oscillates.

Before concluding this discussion of the eyebrows, we must of course cite the words of Charles Le Brun, the *premier peintre* of the court of Louis XIV and one of the great experts on the features of the human form and their expressive power. In his *Conférence . . . sur l’expression générale et particulière*, published in 1698, Le Brun writes:

> Just as we said that the gland situated in the center of the brain is the place where the soul gathers the images of the passions, the eyebrow is the place in all the face where the passions can best be recognized, although many have said instead that this happens in the eyes.

Le Brun’s treatise is accompanied by a series of illustrations, drawn by the artist himself, beginning with a depiction of “Tranquility”—a kind of “zero grade” of the human soul—which formed the basis for the other emotions: *l’Admiration, l’Etonnement, l’Attention, le Mépris* and so on. As we flip through these various illustrations, it is impossible to overlook the special attention Le Brun devoted to the eyebrows in altering the expression of the “schematic” face. Varying the length, inclination and shape of the *supercilium*, he clearly attributed great importance to it as a part of the face that reveals the “passions.”

Let us then return to *vultus* and to the problem with which we began: where *vultus* is “located.” *Vultus*, the major focal point of which is the eyes (and indeed often tending to be identified with the eyes), nevertheless extends to include other parts of the face such as the forehead and the eyebrows, which are likewise endowed with the power to express a person’s inner state. In short, it seems that *vultus* is generally understood by the Romans to be the upper portion of the face and that this region is considered by Roman culture to transmit the emotions of the soul.

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The Face That Deceives and the Vultus/Mask

In *De Oratore*, Cicero discusses a variety of comic effects, including the humor of shameless imitation—such as when Crassus caricatures his opponent Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus by exclaiming *per tuam nobilitatem*, *per vestram familiam* (“by your noble descent, by your family line”), thus provoking the audience’s laughter.68 According to Cicero, the comic effects of caricature are achieved by means of *vocis ac vultus imitatio* (“imitation of the voice and face”). As with the voice, then, it was possible to imitate the *vultus* so as to induce laughter (The Romans were well aware of how annoying such caricatures could be for the butt of the joke).69 In caricature, the *vultus* is imitated in order to inspire laughter—that is, with the intention of revealing the identity of the person against whom the comic attack is directed. *Depravata imitatio* therefore presupposes the “recognizability” of this person and that the caricature will be deciphered immediately; otherwise, the comic effect would not work.70

It is also possible to imitate the *vultus* in such a way that masks the fact of “imitation”—not to provoke laughter, but to deceive the “audience.” In a passage we have already cited in part, Servius makes a very interesting observation in this regard. The grammarian has been commenting on one of the most famous instances of “the double” in Roman literature: when Cupid mimics Ascanius’ physical features in order to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas. Vergil has Venus give her son the following instructions: *tu faciem illius noctem non amplius unam / falle dolo, et notos pueri puer indue vultus* (“use your tricks to counterfeit the face [*facies*] of Ascanius for not more than one night and, boy that you are, put on the familiar face [*vultus*] of that boy”).71 Servius remarks: *faciem pro vultu posuit. nullus enim faciem alterius potest accipere, sed vultum, qui pro mentis qualitate formatum, unde infra est ‘et notos pueri puer indue vultus’* (“Vergil has used the word *facies* in the place of the word *vultus*. In fact, no one would ever put on the *facies* of someone else: but they could assume someone else’s *vultus* because it is shaped in relation to the qualities of the mind. This is why Vergil says later, ‘and, boy that you are, put on the familiar face [*vultus*] of that boy’”).

Apparently, it was possible to imitate someone’s *vultus* but not their *facies*.72 This imitation was possible because the shape of the *vultus* derived

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69. Sen. *De const.* 2.17, *quid quod offendimur, si quis sermonem nostrum imitatur, si quis incessum, si quis vitium aliquod corporis aut linguae exprimit?*
70. The issue of caricature obviously also interested Freud 1972a, 178 and 186.
72. This *differentia* in relation to the *vultus* is frequently repeated by the grammarians and
from an inner state or moral condition, and because it was considered distinct from someone’s “natural” bodily features. Vultus is thus implicated in a cultural sphere of great interest: deception. Indeed, precisely because the face functions as a kind of semiotic “interface” that reveals a person’s interior state, feelings and emotions, it can also be used in deception, giving a false impression of what that person “really” feels. Lying, after all, is also a form of semiosis. It is clear that vultus can be faked: for example, Cicero encourages the idea that true glory cannot be achieved ficto non modo sermone, sed etiam vultu (“either by lying words or by a lying face”). He also denounces Staienus—full of “nothing but fraud and falsehood”—for his fictos simulatosque vultus (“false and simulated expressions”). Even more interesting in this regard is Cicero’s denunciation of Piso, which we have already had a chance to mention: oculi supercilia frons vultus denique totus, qui sermo quidam tacitus mentis est, hic in fraudem homines impulit, hic eos quibus erat ignotus decepit, fefeller, induxit (“the eyes, the eyebrows, the forehead, in short, the entire vultus, which is something like a silent language of the mind, is what has dragged the others into his trap; it is his vultus that has tricked them, deceiving and entangling those who were not familiar with the man”).

The vultus, because it is a “silent language” that allows the mind to convey its inward state, can be used to transmit true as well as false messages. Because, as Quintilian writes, “people rely on [the vultus], they look at it, they see it even before someone begins to speak . . . so that the vultus is often worth more than all the words taken together,” liars employ this recognized “language of the mind” in their deceptions. People rely on observation of the vultus in order to decipher someone’s sentiments and intentions. Cicero therefore attributes a kind of moral responsibility to the face: falsifying the vultus, as Piso did, is an utterly reprehensible act. In fact, the vultus was traditionally considered the locus of sincerity. The face speaks and provides independent evidence of a person’s will and intentions. “An anxious face can reveal a great deal (multa sed trepidus solet / detegere vultus),” Seneca’s Atreus says. The chorus of his Hercules Oetaeus remarks: “Even if you would deny it, your face declares whatever you are hiding (licet ipsa neges / vultus loquitur quodcumque tegis).”

commentators (see below, 160–61, in regard to forma).

73. Cic. Off. 2.12.43.
74. Cic. Clu. 72. Another case of simulation of the vultus can be found in Stat. Theb. 7.739, with Jupiter simulans Halicamona vultu.
75. Cic. Pis. 1.1. On this passage, see the excellent analysis of Ricottilli 2000, 56ff.
Using the face in deception is particularly reprehensible because within the system of cultural expectations, *vultus* is considered an even more direct and sincere “language” than the spoken word—unable to be falsified, because involuntary and independent of a person’s willful control.\(^{78}\)

A liar’s efforts are not always successful, of course. It is possible for the falsification of the *vultus* to be flawed; as a result, the audience may manage to decipher what is “really” going on. Vergil provides an interesting example of this situation in the fifth book of the *Aeneid*. The goddess Iris, in order to convince the Trojan women to set fire to their ships, puts aside her own *facies* and divine *vestis*, taking on the appearance of the old woman Beroe in every detail (*fit Beroe* [“she becomes Beroe”]).\(^{79}\) After making her impassioned speech to the Trojan women, the false Beroe hurls a firebrand at the ships—to the dismay of the Trojan women who are standing there. But the old woman Pyrgo, nurse to Priam’s sons, does not fall for the goddess’ trick:

\[
\text{non Beroe vobis \ldots}
\]

\[
\ldots \text{divini signa decoris}
\]

\[
\text{ardentesque notate oculos, qui spiritus illi,}
\]

\[
\text{qui vultus vocisque sonus vel gressus eunti.}^{80}\]

Women, this is not Beroe \ldots look at the signs of divine beauty, the fire in her eyes, her spirit, her face and the sound of her voice and the way in which she walks.

As we know, someone’s voice and gait are powerful markers of identity. But evidently Iris is not as talented as Cupid: she has failed to imitate Beroe’s voice and gait perfectly. She is also betrayed by her eyes (whose ardor betrays a *spiritus* an old woman could not possibly possess) and by her *vultus*—the silent language of the mind, which transmitted involuntary and therefore sincere signals that she was not human. And old Pirgo noticed.

The possibility of falsifying one’s own *vultus* and transforming it into a deceptive sign invites us to reflect upon the words Vergil uses in describing Cupid’s “simulation” of Iulus: *et notos pueri puer indue vultus* (“and, boy that you are, put on the familiar face of that boy”).\(^{81}\) The verb the poet employs

\(^{78}\) This seems to be the reason why, in some cases, the *vultus* functions as an identificatory element of the person, capabling of making it recognizable; so, for example, in Sen. *Oed.* 840, the title-character asks the old Corinthius: *referes nomen aut vultum senis?* In Sen. *Herc. Fur.* 1016ff., Megara, confronted with Hercules’ madness, exclaims: *natus hic vultus tuos / habitusque reddit.*

\(^{79}\) Verg. *Aen.* 5.619ff.

\(^{80}\) Verg. *Aen.* 5.646ff.

\(^{81}\) Verg. *Aen.* 5.646ff.
here—*induere*—clearly refers to “putting something on,” as if Cupid had put a sort of mask over his face. The expression *induere vultum* (or *vultūs*) is used elsewhere to indicate the act of making facial expressions. Seneca says quite clearly: *indue dissimilem animo tuo vultum* (“put on a face that does not match your spirit”).

Thanks to the image of “putting on” a *vultus*, we recognize that this word covers the same range of meaning as *persona*. To the extent that it can be imitated and even falsified, *vultus* operates noticeably at odds with its own “transparent” character. The enigmatic, tangled ways of the human heart and its capacity to experience—and at the same time to counterfeit—sincere passions allows *vultus* to function in the same manner as *persona*—that is, as an index, as a way to reach the depths of someone’s soul or as a screen for deception. And so we return once again to the *prosōpon* and to its double sense, both “face” and “mask”—although we have reached it by an entirely different route than that followed by the Greeks. If the Greeks associated the face and the mask as purely exterior phenomena, subject to the reciprocity of the gaze, the Romans associated them through their capacity to reveal “interiorities,” real or falsified, through a series of signs.

**The Natural Face**

We now come to another—probably long anticipated—point in our journey. Since we have been speaking about the “face,” it was only a matter of time before we would have to deal with *facies*. This word designates both “the face” in particular and “physical appearance” in a more general sense. We have already encountered this term in Servius’ observation that it is possible to imitate *vultus*, but not *facies*. Why should this be the case? The origin of the word *facies* itself may provide an answer to this question. Both Varro and Aulus Gellius posit a relationship between *facies* and the verb *facio*. As Varro states:

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proprio nomine dicitur facere a facie, qui rei quam facit imponit faciem.
ut fuctor cum dicit ‘fingo’ figuram imponit, quod dicit formo, formam, sic
cum dicit ‘facio’ faciem imponit.84
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The verb *facere* derives from *facies*, because the person who makes something gives it a *facies*. Just as the *fictor*, when he says ‘*fingo*’, gives a *figura* to something; or when he says ‘*formo*’, gives a *forma* to something, so when he says ‘*facio*’ he gives something a *facies*.

Deriving the verb from the abstract noun, Varro takes the opposite approach to what we would probably do; but the relationship between the two terms is clear. Similarly, Aulus Gellius, in a long and interesting chapter on the uses of the word *facies*, explains:

> facies . . . forma omnis et modus et factura quaedam corporis totius a faciendo dicta, ut ab aspectu species et a fingendo figura.\(^{85}\)

*Facies* is the complete conformity and measure and making of the entire body: it derives from the verb *facere*, just as the word *species* derives from *aspectus* and *figura* from *fingere*.

It seems that the word *facies* denotes “the face” (or “bodily appearance” more generally) via a metaphor similar to Italian *fattezze* (‘features’) or English “build.” *Facies* refers to the physical traits of the face—the specific way in which the face or the entire person is “made.” In other words, *facies* belongs to the natural order and exists independently of a person’s impulses or emotions. As Isidore says, *facies simpliciter accipitur de uniuscuisque naturali aspectu, vultus autem animorum qualitatem significant* (“the *facies* is simply understood from each person’s natural appearance, while the *vultus* indicates the qualities of the soul”).\(^{86}\)

This is why in a world still unacquainted with plastic surgery the *facies* cannot be falsified or forged. The *facies* comes from nature. Presumably, no one can so alter his own features so that they match another’s—unless, of course, he happens to be a god, like Mercury who takes on the appearance of Sosia in Plautus’ *Amphitruo* or the goddess Iris who sets aside her own *facies* in order to “become” Beroe (even if the *vultus* manifested upon her *facies* eventually betrays her). Precisely because it forms a “natural” part of physical appearance—that is, the inimitable arrangement of facial features—*facies* bears the burden of verifying identity. This is why Morpheus, disguised as Ceyx, shouts at the wretched Halcyon: *agnoscis Ceyca, miserrima coniunx? / an mea mutata est facies nece? respice, nosce* (“do you recognize your Ceyx, my miserable wife? Or is my *facies* so altered by death? Look carefully, recognize

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me”). 87 Facies defines the link between the person and their capacity to be recognized.

Naturally, there are cases in which human beings (and not only divine beings like Iris) are able to alter their facies, even if incompletely. This is true of women who use cosmetics to make themselves more beautiful, for example. In Ovid’s treatment of this topic, the poet shows with what cura the puellae of the Augustan age are able to commendare their facies with cosmetics. 88 Ovid justifies this feminine cosmetic cultus with an interesting simile, comparing it to the cultus that nature receives through agricultural practice: weeds are replaced by the fruits of Ceres. Therefore, if civilization is born out of the cultus of nature, how can one deny cultus to the female face? 89

Traditional Roman morals, however, characterized women’s cosmetics in far less ennobling terms. In Plautus’ Mostellaria, the young Philematium, in a long toilette scene, asks the old woman Scapha to hand her some purpurissum (“rouge”). The old woman refuses to give it to her: non do . . . nova pictura interpolare vis opus lepidissimum? (“I’m not going to give it to you: do you want to paint over what is already a masterpiece?”). 90

The face of a woman—especially that of a beautiful woman—is like the canvas of a great master: to cover it with cosmetics would be like ruining a painting with new colors. The word interpolare used by Plautus is quite interesting. 91 Scapha will use the same word again later, in adjectival form, to describe old women who try to beautify themselves with perfumes and cosmetics—only to obtain effects so ghastly as to merit inclusion in Jonathan Swift’s notoriously misogynistic Lady’s Dressing Room. As Scapha exclaims, nam istae veteres, quae se unguentis unctitant, interpoles, vetulae, edentulae (“look at those old women who smear themselves with lotions, these interpoles, these toothless hags”). 92 The word interpolare is a technical term of the fullones, who used this technique to restore the appearance of old clothes. 93 According to Plautus, the female facies is not like a piece of clothing that can be “touched up.” The face should be left as is; nature should be given her due. Similarly, Pliny the Elder did not want women to use false eyelashes because, as he says, alia de causa hoc natura dederat (“it was not for this

92. Plaut. Most. 274.
93. Non. Marcell. De comp. doctr. 34.1 Lindsay.
purpose that nature gave them eyelashes”). Moralists always know what Nature is—and know even better what Nature has prescribed!

The Recognizable Face and Personal Identity

Ovid’s false Ceyx demonstrates what an important factor facies is in determining someone’s identity: “Do you recognize your Ceyx, my miserable wife? Or is my facies so altered by death? Look carefully, recognize me.” Isidore is explicit in connecting facies with what we would define as “identity”: facies dicta ab effigie. ibi est enim tota figura hominis et uniuscuiusque personae cognitio (“the word facies is from effigies: this is where the entire figure of a man is located—that is to say, the means of recognizing each person”). In another passage, he states that facies dicta est, eo quod notitiam faciat hominis (“we say facies because it makes [faciat] someone recognizable”). As usual, Isidore’s etymological explanation strikes us as fanciful. But by insisting on this relationship between the facies and the notitia or cognitio hominis, Isidore provides us with some very precious evidence.

Notitia and cognitio hominis are Latin phrases equivalent in function to the modern notion of “identity.” If we were to translate Isidore’s words into a more modern idiom, we might be tempted to say, “Facies defines a person’s identity.” In doing so, however, we would be ignoring the slow and laborious process that leads to the modern notion of identity. Born out of philosophical reflection, this cultural configuration supposes that it is the characteristic of “permanence”—always “being the same” (idem, identitas) in different phases and contexts—that defines someone’s or something’s identity. With Isidore’s evidence, we find ourselves not at the philosophical but a social—or “civic”—stage of identity. The quality of “sameness” (“intrinsicness,” so to speak) is not considered a feature that defines someone’s identity. Rather, identity is simply the ability to be recognized by others. “Identity” is notitia or cognitio by others, who, in recognizing us, affirm that we are who we are, or, in not recognizing us, deny us our own identity.

In Latin, cognitio in fact refers to the recognition of someone or something that is already known to us, often covering the same semantic space as Greek anagnōrisis. As such, cognitio of someone—recognizing him or her—functions as a kind of guarantee of identity. To give just one example:

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95. Isid. Etym. 1133.
96. Isid. Diff. 2.52.
97. Naturally, this does not mean that the permanence, and above all the presence, of the past in the form of memories, do not subjectively play a part in personal identification; see above, 117–19.
when Hyginus tells the story of Theseus, he describes the test of recognition to which Aegaeus subjects his son Theseus: *cum posset eum lapidem allevare et gladium patris tollere, ibi fore indicium cognitionis filii* (“if he should be able to raise the stone and lift his father’s sword, this would be the proof of his son’s identity”). Theseus, by accomplishing this task, provides what we would call “proof of identity” as the son of Aegaeus.98 *Notitia*, the other ancient Latin term pertaining to identity, expresses the idea of “renown” or “cognizance.” Pyramus and Thisbe, the two famous lovers of Ovid’s story, lived in neighboring houses along the wall built by Semiramis: *notitiam pri-mosque gradus vicinia fecit* (“their closeness created cognizance and motivated the first steps”). *Notitia* means that two people “know one another”—that they recognize one another’s faces whenever they meet.99

When Isidore speaks of *cognitio* or *notitia hominis*, “identity” is placed on the level of recognition. External recognition guarantees that someone really is that person. An intriguing scene of Plautus’ *Stichus* provides additional evidence for this “recognition” model of identity. A *pater* discusses with his two daughters the qualities most valued in a woman: when Antipho asks *quae mulier videtur tibi sapientissuma?* (“which woman seems to you the most wise?”), his daughter Panegyris answers, *quae tamen, quom res secundae sunt, se poterit gnoscere* (“she who, when things go well, can be recognized as herself”).100 At Rome, what we would define as the ability to maintain one’s identity in all circumstances corresponds to the ability to be recognized.101 Seneca tells us something interesting in this regard, as well. Speaking of mirrors, Seneca insists that they were invented *ut homo ipse se nosset, multa ex hoc consecuturus, primum sui notitiam* (“so that a person could know himself and thus procure many advantages: first and foremost cognizance of himself”).102 The mirror furnishes man his “recognizability”—we would say his identity.

The manifestation of personal identity through a process of recognition


100. On the theme of “keeping contact with oneself” (*respicere*) as a support for one’s own identity, cf. Bettini 1991c, 122ff.

plays a role in other aspects of Roman social life, as well. For example, the function of the *agnitor* is to “acknowledge” and therefore guarantee the authenticity of a sealed document. Once again, the process of identification occurs through a form of direct personal recognition. When Quintilian describes the care that the *patronus* must give to examining the documentation for a case, he warns his students: *denique linum ruptum atque turbatam ceram aut sine agnitore signa frequenter invenies* (“it often happens that the cord might be broken or that the wax is altered or the seals are not attested by an *agnitor*”). The *agnitor* is a key figure; his function involves the validation and identification of *signa*, just as *cognitio* or *notitia* involves the validation of someone’s identity. Both are accomplished through another individual.

Another example from Plautus demonstrates just how much personal identity in ancient Rome depended on recognition by others. In the *Miles Gloriosus*, Sceledrus and Palaestrio are not recognized by the girl Philocomasium, although the two of them recognize her perfectly well. It is precisely what we would define again as the “identity” of the two heroes that is at stake:

*Phil.* quis tu homo es aut mecum quid est negoti?

*Scel.* me rogas, hem, qui sim? *Phil.* quin ego hoc rogem quod nesciam?


*Scel.* certe equidem noster sum. *Pal.* et pol ego. 104

*Phil.* And you: who are you? What do you have to do with me?

*Scel.* What? You’re asking me who I am? *Phil.* Why shouldn’t I, seeing as I don’t know you?

*Pal.* Who am I then, if you don’t recognize him? *Phil.* Whoever you are, I don’t like you: you and him both. *Scel.* You don’t recognize us? *Phil.* Neither one. *Scel.* Now I really am afraid.

*Pal.* What are you afraid of? *Scel.* I am afraid that we have lost ourselves somewhere, since she says she doesn’t know either of us, not you, and not me either. *Pal.* I’d really like to figure this out, Sceledrus: are we ours any-


104. Plaut. *Mil.* 425ff. In fact, Palaestrio had early made an agreement with Philocomasium to pretend not to recognize them, to throw Sceledrus into doubt.
more, or someone else's? I wouldn't want for one of our neighbors to have secretly changed us without our knowing it.

scel. Of course we are ours. pal. Me too, by Pollux!

Seeing that Philocomasium does not recognize either him or Palaestrio, Sceledrus is afraid that they have “lost themselves” somewhere. Palaestrio raises the stakes, wondering if by some chance they have not “lost possession” of themselves, transformed unawares by one of the neighbors and consequently no longer recognizable by their acquaintances. This lack of recognition—a loss of notitia—corresponds in every way to what we would call “loss of identity.”

Naturally, such examples may be multiplied. Take, for example, the paradoxical adventures of the emperor Jovinianus in the Gesta Romanorum. The emperor has lost his own identity, replaced by an angel as divine punishment for his arrogant behavior. The tribulations of Jovinianus involve being chased out of his own court, being rejected by his friends and even being attacked by his own dog. In short, the emperor is systematically “not recognized” by those who were once closest to him. This drama of lost identity is expressed through the loss of the emperor’s notitia, the same word used by Isidore when he located the possibility of being recognized in the facies. Jovinianus has lost his own “recognizance”; here too we might easily say, his “identity.”

Realistic Faces, Togate Statues

In the course of our analysis, we have encountered at least three different linguistic and cultural manifestations of the Roman “face”: os, the “speaking” face; vultus, the face as “interiority”; and facies, the “natural” face. In all three, we have seen the wealth of connotations they presuppose. Let us pause for a moment to reflect on this. It is quite striking from how many perspectives “the face” is considered in Roman culture. All this linguistic attention will certainly prove interesting for an anthropology of images. In fact, it is difficult to avoid imagining that some relationship exists between the importance attributed to the face in the Latin language and two quite idiosyncratic aspects of Roman culture: the ius imaginum on one hand and the practice of portraiture on the other.

As we know, Roman aristocratic tradition kept alive the memory of ancestors’ “faces” through a complicated ritual involving wax masks, the

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105. Oesterley 1872, ch. 59 (51), 360ff.: cf. 362, 4; 15; 26; 364, 36 (notitia hominis).
imagines maiorum. These masks, modeled after the features of deceased relatives, were a sort of iconographic archive of the family’s physical features. They were normally kept in cabinets made specifically for this purpose and placed in the atrium of the house. When a family member died, the masks were taken down and worn by those participating in the funeral procession. Thus, the family’s ancestors, wearing the insignia and uniforms of the offices they had held in life, were able to walk the streets of Rome once again, accompanying their deceased progeny to their final resting place.\textsuperscript{106} The Roman nobility attributed a tremendous cultural importance (at once genealogical, political and religious) to the face in the form of the expressi cera vultus of their maiores.\textsuperscript{107}

The same may be said for the role played by the portrait in Roman artistic culture. In fact, the practice of portraiture—both a public and a family ritual—focused primarily on the face, which was represented in the most realistic detail, taking care to express the subject’s “inner self” and character.\textsuperscript{108} It appears that in the form of the funeral imago and the portrait, Roman cultural practice was as equally concerned with “the face” as the Latin language, with its wealth of expressions and “takes” on facial appearance. For the Romans, the face appears to have been an object of central cultural importance. The face was looked at, reflected in language, and reproduced by art. But why were the Romans so interested in the face?

This question inevitably leads us into a Roman anthropology of the body—a subject on which there is much work yet to be done. But let us try, for a moment, to picture the figure who stands at the center of Roman life, who was the object of so much attention, and who—in reality, or in the ideological representation of reality—performed the actual functioning of Roman civitas: the adult Roman male, the civis. Before us is a man completely covered by a toga—a form of clothing so strongly marked both in terms of Roman identity and “belonging” that it served as a true and proper “uniforme de la citoyenneté.”\textsuperscript{109} The toga constructs the body of the citizen in the manner of a ritual garment, transforming him into a sort of living statue: a statua togata, we might say, just like the togate statues that the Romans themselves used to set up.\textsuperscript{110} In his rejection of nudity and in his solemn (even obsessive) concern with arranging the flowing toga, the civis

\textsuperscript{106.} Bettini 1991c, 179ff.; Flower 1996, 91ff.
\textsuperscript{107.} Plin. \textit{Nat. hist.} 35.6.
\textsuperscript{108.} Cf. e.g. the classic analysis of Bianchi Bandinelli 1976, 71ff. who rightly made an important connection between Roman portraiture and the use of the imagines maiorum.
\textsuperscript{109.} Dupont 1989, 290.
\textsuperscript{110.} Barghop 1996, 81–87.
\textsuperscript{111.} Plin. \textit{Nat. hist.} 34.18.
Romanus did not put any part of his body on display—with the exception of the face, of course.\textsuperscript{112}

It was thus upon the citizen’s face that attention inevitably was placed, both in terms of the words used to discuss and describe the face and the cultural practices focusing upon the face. Others—those who grant us, in the form of notitia or cognitio, our identity; those who gaze at the politician, the father, the orator and so forth in order to recognize who they are and to read their character—necessarily gaze upon the face. Likewise, it is the face in the form of a wax mask that its wearer takes care to coordinate with the appropriate type of toga—and nothing else—that identifies an ancestor. Again, “the face” identifies someone in a portrait, an image that “realistically” portrays their physical features and the inclinations of their character.

The Manufactured Face

Let us return to Latin facies. As we have already seen, facies is a rather transparent derivate of facio. Moreover, Roman authors who analyze the meaning of this term regularly turn to metaphors taken from the artistic domain—the world of the fictor, of fingere, figura and formare. In other words, the metaphorical field used to describe someone’s bodily or facial appearance (facies) clearly corresponds to that of manufacturing, in the sense of “forming” or “creating” something. In this regard, the clear relationship that Aulus Gellius posits between facies and factura is very interesting: “the facies is the complete conformity and measure and make up (factura) of the entire body: it derives, in fact, from facere.”\textsuperscript{113} Factura is obviously derived from the field of manufacture, and can also be applied to bodily appearance. Therefore, it is as if someone’s appearance/facies were defined through the image of an object made and shaped by someone else. As anticipated, the set of terms and cultural representations used by the Romans to describe bodily appearance cannot be described by a single model. We have already seen that “the face” was considered a mouth (os) and a window to the inner self (vultus.) Now, it seems that “the face” (facies) is “manufactured.” This aspect of the problem deserves further exploration, for there are many terms in Latin for “physical appearance” taken from this metaphorical field.

\textsuperscript{112} Cf. Bettini 1999b, 8–21.

\textsuperscript{113} Aul. Gell. N.4. 13.30; cf. also Non. Marcell. De comp. doctr. 52 Lindsay, a factura corporis facies; Marius Victorinus, Rhetorica 1.5, qualitatis . . . si dicas cuius generis vestis, cuius generis factura; Oribasius, Synopsis ad Eustathium filium 5.45, parva factura capitis; cf. TLL VI, 1, 142–144 Hey.
Consider the word *forma*. This term has an extensive and complex range of uses, with meanings ramifying in a number of different directions. To complicate matters further, the etymological origin of the word *forma* is not altogether certain.\(^{114}\) An analysis of the full semantic range covered by *forma* would be an undertaking quite disproportionate to our aims here, but we can be certain of the fact that *forma* was used by the Romans to refer to “physical appearance.”\(^{115}\) In fact, the ancient lexicographers seem to have attributed to *forma* the same characteristics as they did to *facies*: it is something natural and stable, opposed to the personal “interiority” and variability of *vultus*. So Donatus: *forma immobile est et naturalis, vultus et movetur et fingitur* (“the *forma* is unmoving and natural, while the *vultus* moves and can be simulated”)\(^{116}\) and *vultum sibi fingere multi possunt, formam nemo* (“many people can fake their *vultus*, but no one can fake their *forma*”).\(^{117}\) The previously cited *scholion* of Eugraphius is in accordance: *forma naturalis facies est, vultus vero animi motu facies ad tempus aptata* (“*forma* is natural appearance, while *vultus* indicates an expression temporarily assumed according to the motions of the soul”).\(^{118}\)

*Forma* is perceived as being very close to *facies* (“the face” defined as something “fashioned” or “made”). We should emphasize, however, that the principal meaning of the word *forma* is very concrete: it denotes the “mold” used both to produce coins and to model wax or shape cheese.\(^{119}\) Once again, physical appearance (*forma*) is associated with a concrete operation of manufacture: producing shapes with a mold. *Forma* has very nearly the same meaning of “physical appearance” as *facies*. Indeed, we have already seen that the Romans themselves perceived these two modes of designating physical appearance—*facies* and *forma*—as very similar to and even interchangeable with one another.

The relationship between “the manufactured” and “bodily appearance”

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115. Cf. *TLL* VI, 1, 1065–87 (esp. 1069, 15ff.).


117. Donat. in Ter. Andr. 120 Wessner.

118. Eugraph. in Ter. Andr. 119 Wessner.

119. Cf. *TLL* VI, 1, 104, 43ff.: *Lex Rubria, CIL* I2.592.2.2, *pecunia... signata forma p(ublica) P(opuli) R(omani); Col. De re rust. 7.8.3, (casus) in calathos vel formas transferendus est; Plin. Nat. hist. 35.153, *cera... in eam formam gypsum;* etc. Cf. the observations of Ernout-Meillet 1965, s.v. *forma*, who in their semantic analysis of the word place the concrete meaning of “mold” at the beginning of the process.
becomes even clearer when we consider the term figura.\textsuperscript{120} This word was also commonly used to mean “bodily appearance” or “semblance,” particularly in the generic sense of “shape.”\textsuperscript{121} For example, in Ovid’s \textit{Heroides}, Ariadne laments the fact that her \textit{figura} could not attract the attention of faithless Theseus: \textit{di facerent ut me summa de puppe videres: / movisset vultus maesta figura tuos} (“If only the gods had made it so that you would see me from up on the stern of the ship! My desolate appearance would have moved even your eyes”).\textsuperscript{122} Theseus sails away aboard his ship—if only Ariadne’s sad silhouette, now vanishing in the distance, had managed to catch his eye! What is important for our analysis is that the ancient sources recognized a relationship between \textit{figura} and the sphere of fingere, the activity of the figulus or fuctor. As Isidore tells us: \textit{figura est, cum impressione alicuius imago exprimitur; veluti si cera ex anulo effigiem sumat aut si figulus in argillam manum vultumque aliquem imprimat et fingendo figuram faciat} (“a figura is an image created by means of an impression, as when a shape is pressed into the wax with a signet ring, or when a potter presses his hand into clay or sculpts someone’s face and creates a \textit{figura} by means of an act of fingere”).\textsuperscript{123} The same idea could also be formulated this way: \textit{figura artis est opus, forma naturae bonum} (“\textit{figura} comes from art, whereas \textit{forma} is a gift of nature”).\textsuperscript{124}

Yet even without the speculations of ancient lexicographers, there is no doubt as to the relationship between \textit{figura} and the root *fig- of fingo.\textsuperscript{125} The author of the \textit{Panegyric of Messalla} explicitly plays on the relationship between fingo and figura when he imagines a kind of metaphoric afterlife: \textit{mutata figura / . . . me finget equum} (“my altered shape . . . will make me a horse”).\textsuperscript{126} Once again, figura corresponds to the act of “creating” or “making.” In this case, what the image refers to is much more specific than was the case for \textit{forma}: the sphere of fingere, in fact, instantly evokes the art of modeling in clay, of sculpting, of painting—of creating artificial images in general. An expression such as \textit{figura} can help us understand, therefore, what specific cultural model stands behind words like facies, factura and forma: the manufacture of images. In other words, we may hypothesize that the Romans, seeking a way to represent themselves in terms of physical appear-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{120} Cf. \textit{TLL VI}, 1, 722–738 Bauer.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Cf. e.g. Cic. \textit{Nat. deor.} 1.32.90, \textit{hoc dico, non ab hominibus formae figuram venisse ad deos}; Cic. \textit{Verr.} 4.36.89, \textit{cum multo magis figura et lineamenta hospitae delectabant}; etc.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Ov. \textit{Her.} 10.133ff.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Isid. \textit{Diff.} 1.528.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Isid. \textit{Diff.} 7.530.5.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Note that the suffix -\textit{ura} is joined here not to the theme of the verbal adjective, as usually occurs, but directly to the root: not \textit{fictura} (hardly attested) but \textit{figura}. Cf. Ernout-Meillet 1965, \textit{s.v. figura}.
\item \textsuperscript{126} \textit{Corpus Tibullianum}, \textit{Panegyricus ad Messallam} 206ff.
\end{itemize}
ance and “outward show,” had recourse to their experience with artificial images.

The Human Form as Artificial Image

This impression seems to find confirmation in other words of the same type. Consider *statura*, for example. This word is derived from *status* (“standing, standing on one’s feet”) and is built with the suffix *-ura* (the same as in *fig-ura*), which, as we know, denotes an abstract verbal idea “put into practice.”

127 *Statura* therefore properly designates the way in which a person puts into practice his ability to stand up—his *habitus*, the specific way in which he inserts himself into the space that surrounds him. This “bodily coordination” is also decisive in determining the specific features of someone’s physical appearance. Witness the following conversation between Hanno and Milphio in Plautus’ *Poenulus*:

HA. sed earum nutrix qua sit facie mihi expedi.
MI. statura hau magna, corpore aquilo. HA. ipsa ea est. 128

HA. But tell me what their nurse looked like.
MI. She was not large in stature, and was darkly colored. HA. That’s her!

What immediately strikes us in this bit of rapid-fire dialogue is the fact that *statura* is able to create identity by distinguishing one person from another. The same thing occurs in Cicero’s *Philippics*, when the orator declares: *velim mihi dicas Lucius Turselius qua facie fuerit, qua statura* (“I would like for you to describe the Lucius Turselius’ appearance and *statura*”).

129 *Statura* is again seen as a quality that contributes substantially to someone’s identity, on par with *facies*.

Because *statura* is such an important personal trait, it may be qualified in various ways. It can be *parva*, *commoda*, *quadrata* and even *tantula*; its *gracilitudo* may be emphasized or its capacity to *excedere* just measure (*iusta*), and so on.

130 *Statura* refers to a person’s appearance in terms of the spatial dimension of verticality, underscoring the specific “bearing” of someone’s

127. *Cursus* > *cursura*, *quaestus* > *quaestura*, *status* > *statura*. On substantives in *-ura*, cf. the classic study of Benveniste 1948, 101ff.
130. *Rhet. ad Her.* 4.33 (parva); Plaut. *As.*, 401 (commoda); Plin. *Nat. hist.* 34.65; Caes. *BG.* 2.30 (tantula); Suet. *Tib.* 68 (*statura quaie iustam excedat*).
body as a distinctive feature of their appearance. But it is not simply how they look; it is also how they stand and what they are like. In this sense, it is difficult to escape making an analogy with *statua*, one of the words used in Latin to designate plastic images “in the round.”\(^{131}\) From the perspective of “verticality”—of *statura*—a human being “stands up” like a *statua*. Once again, the models used in the representation of human physical appearance intersect with the world of artificial images.

While *statura* is oriented towards “verticality,” *lineamentum* refers to the characteristics of the body itself, to the distinctive elements of its physical features: its “lines.” Cicero speaks of a woman’s *figura* and *lineamenta*.\(^ {132}\) In another passage, he uses these words to praise the beauty of the human figure in general: *quae compositio membrorum, quae conformatio lineamentorum, quae figura, quae species humana potest esse pulchrior?* (“What arrangement of parts, what congruity of features, what shape, what aspect could be more lovely than that of the human body?”).\(^ {133}\)

In a discussion of human physiognomy and the divine wisdom revealed therein, Minucius Felix makes a very interesting distinction between *figura* and *lineamenta*:

\[ \text{magis mirum est eadem figura omnibus [hominibus], sed quaedam un-} \]
\[ \text{cuique lineamenta deflexa; sic et similis universi videmur et inter se dis-} \]
\[ \text{similes invenimur.} \]

Even more remarkable is the fact that people all have the same *figura*, but each one still has his or her own *lineamenta*. Therefore, we all have a similar appearance, but we are found to be different from one another.

According to Minucius, *lineamenta* bear the burden of expressing individual identity, while *figura* (which, as we know, embraces a more general semantic space) seems instead to be a marker of what we might call “species identity.” From the point of view that interests us here—the relationship between human appearance and artificial images—it is interesting to note, however, that *lineamenta* is also commonly used to refer to the “contours” of artistic images, such as paintings and sculptures.\(^ {135}\) No doubt, the original sphere

\(^{131}\) On the relationship between *statua*, *signum* and *imago* see Pucci 1991, 107–29.

\(^{132}\) Cic. *Verr.* 4.89.

\(^{133}\) Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.47.


\(^{135}\) Cf. *TLI* VII, 2, 1438–1440 Bader (esp. 1439, 77ff.); cf. e.g. Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.27.75, *cedo mihi istorum adumbratorum deorum lineamenta atque formas*; Cic. *Verr.* 2.4.98 (operum lineamenta); Val. Max. 3.7, ext. 4, *vultum Iovis Olympi . . . eboris lineamentis . . . amplexus.*
of reference of lineamenta is precisely that of artificial images: the “features” evoked to represent the shape of the human form, even of an individual, are understood as the “lines” drawn by an artist in the process of creating an image. Here, we recognize the same metaphorical extension between these two fields that we have already seen.

Remaining within the sphere of fingere, an analogous metaphorical process occurs with the word effigies—a term we have already seen in our discussion of facies. Effigies primarily designates an artificial image, but it equally designates the contours of the human form, just as figura does.\(^{136}\) Pliny declares:

\[
\text{in facie vultuque nostro cum sint decem aut paulo plura membra, nullas duas in tot milibus hominum indiscretas effigies existere, quod ars nulla in paucis numero praestet adfectando.}\(^{137}\)
\]

Although our face and aspect consist of just ten parts, or just a few more, there are not two faces, two effigies, which are identical among all the thousands of people in the world: this is a result that no art would be able to achieve even a much smaller number of creations.

Something similar occurs with the much more complicated word filum. As may still be seen with English “filament,” filum is “a thread.”\(^ {138}\) Metaphorically, however, filum becomes deducta res quaeque ad tenuitatem (“anything drawn out and thin”)\(^ {139}\) and may therefore refer to the edge of a sword or the extremely thin shape that characterizes the end of a blade.\(^ {140}\) What is interesting for our purposes is that the word filum was used (by Lucretius) to refer to something more or less equivalent to our “contour.” For example, he uses this term to refer to the shape of elements, the image of the sun, objects whose appearance blurs with distance and the appearance of fires in the sky.\(^ {141}\) This metaphor—the “filament” (filum) reduced to an almost imperceptible thinness—is well suited to define the extremely subtle outline of a shape and, above all, an image. For this reason, filum—and here we return to the field that interests us—could be used to describe external

\(^{136}\) Cf. TLL V, 2, 180–84.


\(^{138}\) Cf. TLL VI, 1, 760–764 Lackenbacher (but the internal organization of this lemma leaves much to be desired).

\(^{139}\) Non. Marcell. De comp. doctr. 313.12 Lindsay.

\(^{140}\) Enn. Ann. 239 Skutsch.

\(^{141}\) Lucr. De re. nat. 2.341, 4.88, 5.571, 589.
It would seem that in these cases, *filum* is almost an equivalent of French “silhouette,” meaning the outline of a person’s body. Varro, speaking of human resemblance, puts it like this: *eo similiores sunt* (sc. homines) *qui facie quoque paene eadem, habitu corporis, filo* (“This is why there is more similarity between people who share the same face, the same bodily deportment, the same silhouette”). Having the same *filum* suggests resemblance as much as having the same *facies*. In the same way, Aulus Gellius describes the art of physiognomy in these terms: *mores naturasque hominum coniectatione quadam, de oris et vultus ingenio, deque totius corporis filo atque habitu sciscitari* (“It detects the character and the nature of people by means of conjecture, based on the characteristics of the face and of its expression, from bodily deportment and from the contour of the entire body”).

There is no explicit ancient evidence that *filum*, in the sense of “contour,” “was employed above all in the language of the artists”—although this is a reasonable hypothesis. What is certain, however, is that *filum* in this sense easily slips towards the world of images. Arnobius rebukes the pagans for wanting to imprison divinity in human form: *at vero vos deos parum est for marum quod amplectimini mensione, filo et adterminatis humano* (“but to you it seems no great thing to constrain the gods into dimensions of these forms, and to limit them with a human contour”).

Lamenting the pagan practice of using prostitutes as models for depicting goddesses, he also wrote that *omni cura studioque certabant [sc. artifices] filum capitis prostituti Cythereia in simulacra traducere* (“with great care and attention the artists compete to transfer the outline of a prostitute’s face onto their images of Venus”). As in the case of English “profile,” Latin *filum* appears to oscillate between the world of real physical features and that of artificial images.

**The Art of Images: A Way to “Think” the Face?**

The convergence of so many terms—*facies, factura, forma, figura, statura, effigies, lineamentum, filum*—in a single direction confirms the idea that Roman
culture borrowed heavily from the domain of artistic practice in representing
the human body. The world of artificial images supplied the Romans with a
metaphor for conceptualizing physical appearance. “The person,” conceived
less as the subject of action, responsibility, feelings and so forth, than as
the pure “appearance” of a face or body, is transformed into an image. This
observation might also prove useful from the perspective of historical psy-
chology, since it illustrates a further aspect of what image making means in
the development of a culture. It is as if the artistic process served not simply
to imitate the body, but also to understand it. As Cicero observed, “people
are not able to think about the gods without the construction of artificial
images that were themselves made by other people.” Indeed, it is as if
people are not able to understand themselves—as “figures,” in their pure
exterior physicality—without the production of replicas of other people.
Reproducing the features of the human form makes it possible to distill from
the complex whole of a person a single set of features and forms defining
their appearance and, at the same time, to endow these features with a spe-
cific value. Naturally, this is a process with deep anthropological roots—and
as such, transcultural character. Indeed, we continue to speak of a person’s
“profile” and “features,” the “lines” and “shape” of their face.

Alienated from the Self and from the person as a whole, “bodily appear-
ance” becomes imagistic. Here, it is difficult not to think again of Sosia’s
words in Plautus’ Amphitruo, when he sees his own person and identity sto-
len from him by the god Mercury. This is what he thinks to himself about
the strange events that have befallen him:

certe edepol, cum illum contempto et formam cognosco meam,
quem ad modum ego sum—saepè in speculum inspexi—nimis similest
mei.149

By Pollux, it’s true: when I look and recognize my own form, the way that
I am—I’ve looked at myself in the mirror often enough—he is entirely
similar to me.

Sosia knows that he has a particular shape. He is familiar with and recognizes
it—and that other person looks amazingly like him. But Sosia soon reaches
another, more desperate conclusion—and it is very close to the subject we
have been discussing:

148. Cic. Nat. deor. 2.45, ut nisi figuris hominum constitutis nihil possint de dis imortalibus cogitare.
149. Plaut. Am. 441ff.
hic quidem omnem imaginem meam quae antehac fuerat possidet.\textsuperscript{150}

That man has taken possession of the entire image that used to be mine.

Seeing himself reflected in another who has a form very much like his own, Sosia discovers that his physical appearance is in fact an \textit{imago}, purely an “image.” Separated from him and scrutinized as an object of fear or comfort, Sosia’s own “person” is fixed in a form that has neither inside nor outside—like an actual image, be it painted or sculpted, whose very essence consists exclusively in its “appearance.” We are very near the psychological mechanisms that we earlier attempted to describe to explain why the description of the human form takes so much of its terminology from the domain of artificial images.

\section*{Immobility and Motion}

We have reached the end. Before concluding, however, I would like to take the discussion a little further, from the point of view of the cultural model to which we have so frequently referred: identity. We know that the face, like physical appearance in general, creates identity: but in what form, exactly? What cultural features did the Romans consider pertinent to this end? First, we must observe that somatic identity in ancient Rome was not so much a matter of “being seen” by others, depending instead on characteristics that were in some sense intrinsic to the subject. We have seen, in fact, that visual expressions such as \textit{species} or \textit{aspectus} are highly generic terms and are not used specifically in regard to the face or the body. Rather, they refer in the most general sense to the appearance of anything visible to the eye. For the Romans, facial and somatic identity were instead a matter of terms such as \textit{os}, \textit{vultus}, \textit{facies}, \textit{figura} and so on. This terminology is drawn from a variety of different metaphorical fields (and we noted that representations of physical appearance in Latin are not always interchangeable), but alike in the fact that they lack a visual dimension.

Within this set of characteristics there seem to be two basic models at work. On one hand, a model deriving from the domain of artificial images, representing physical appearance and in particular the face as something “fashioned” or “made:” \textit{facies}, \textit{figura}, \textit{statura}, \textit{lineamentum} and so on. The other model is represented by the words \textit{os} and \textit{vultus}. At this point, we can better define this model as deriving from the category of “movement.” Both

\textsuperscript{150} Plaut. \textit{Am.} 458.
os and vultus make physical mobility a pertinent feature of the human face: os represents the face as “speaking,” while vultus represents the face as a shifting “disposition” bound to the individual’s inner state (and actually able to be imitated or falsified). If we accept the popular derivation of vultus from the word family of volvo, then etymologically speaking vultus already expresses this feature of “mobility.”151 In other words, it seems that in identifying a person Latin speakers attribute an important role to those parts of the face that moved.

This is hardly surprising, given that other “moving” parts of the face were considered capable of conveying someone’s sentiments and personality. This is true of the eyes, the forehead, and—above all—the eyebrows. Even if these are incapable of overshadowing other facial features and of designating the face or countenance by themselves—as os and vultus do—nevertheless they are parts of the face that possess a strong identificatory power in the Roman cultural encyclopedia. If we turn from the face to the body as a whole, it is worth noting again that gressus was also considered highly characteristic of the individual. As such, it played a critical role in all cases of “doubling” and “impersonation.”152 But also in the case of gressus identity is established through that which “moves,” that which marks someone as definitely “living.”

It is perhaps not unreasonable, then, to conclude that a person’s somatic and facial identity in ancient Rome oscillated between the two poles of “immobility” and “movement”—the image as something “fashioned” and the person as a “living being.” At different times, the person may be identified by his more spiritual and specifically human “moving” characteristics, or by those that derive from the fixity of a factura. To speak about a person and to define “who he is” in terms of his appearance means to emphasize both his nature as a fixed image and his specifically “living” and “mobile” features. To identify someone means on the one hand to assimilate that person to an immobile statue or a manufactured figure and on the other to emphasize that person’s resources as a living, constantly changing creature. The image that moves, the statue that speaks, the “natural” facies that changes its expression, a human being’s physical “person”—his “being there” on the stage of the world—unrelentingly poses this linguistic challenge to culture: “describe me.”

152. Perhaps the importance of the gait in identification also has something to do with the “centralité” (Dupont 1989, 290) of the use of the toga at Rome? When the entire body is covered, only someone’s gait—their “way of walking”—gives the onlooker some hint for determining that person’s identity.