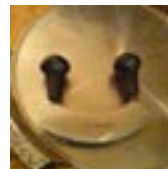
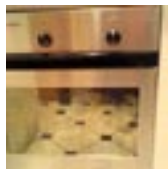
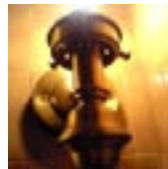
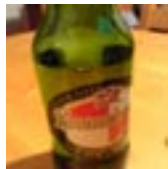
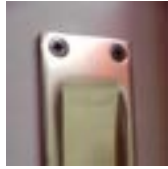


Found Faces

The Perceptive Process of Observing a Found Face

Nicholas Hearne



You should look at certain walls stained with damp, or at stones of uneven colour. If you have to invent some backgrounds you will be able to see in these the likeness of divine landscapes, adorned with mountains, ruins, rocks, woods, great plains, hills and valleys in great variety; and then again you will see there battles and strange figures in violent action; expressions of faces and clothes and an infinity of things which you will be able to reduce to their complete and proper forms.

Leonardo Da Vinci 1452 – 1519



Contents

Introduction.....	6
Facial Recognition.....	9
How We Find Faces.....	15
Anthropomorphology.....	27
Bibliography.....	33
Webliography.....	34

Introduction

'Pencil in a pair of dots, put a curved line below and draw a circle around the whole lot. What have you got? A face of course (B Spice 2004).'

Facial recognition is an essential survival strategy that is inbuilt in the human mind from birth. A new-born baby will respond instinctively to the pattern of a human face (J Mitchell 1979). This predisposition for facial recognition means that our subconscious mind is constantly looking for faces. Throughout life we have a tendency to see 'our own and animal images reflected in the world around us (J Mitchell 1979).'

Even the simplest arrangement of objects can look like a simplified face. 'The fact that your mind is capable of taking a circle, two dots and a line and turning them into a face is nothing short of incredible (S McCloud 1993).'

Smiley. A basic face created in 1970s is used to convey different emotions and is frequently used on the internet.

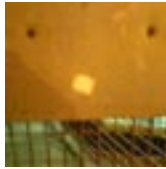


The mental process of being able to recognise faces and other alternative figures in objects is part of our visual genius. 'We have all had the experience of finding an odd-looking vegetable and seeing something other than the vegetable itself; a funny face, a cute animal, a contorted body, a mini-monster, an overgrown insect (J Elffers 1997).'

These 'found faces' can also have cultural and religious significance, some even have a large financial value. Conspiracy theorists contrive faces from scans of the surface of Mars and in plumes of smoke from disasters. A 10-year-old grilled cheese sandwich which bears the image of the face of the Virgin Mary was purchased by GoldenPalace.com for \$28,000 (D B Givens 2005). In recent news, hundreds of people flocked to view an image of Virgin Mary on a Chicago motorway underpass wall.



A 10-year-old grilled cheese sandwich which bears the image of the face of the Virgin Mary was purchased by GoldenPalace.com for \$28,000 (D B Givens 2005).



Facial Recognition

Recognising faces is an important process that we learn from a very early age. 'The face is an important site for the identification of others and conveys significant social information (encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com).' We can define face perception as the process by which the 'brain and mind understand and interpret the face (wikipedia.org)' Humans have the ability to recognise and recall thousands of faces at a glance. This active process of facial recognition 'can lead us to see 'faces' in clouds, in rock formations, on screen doors, in shrouds, and on the surface of Moon (D B Givens 2005).'

The area of the brain used for facial recognition is positioned behind the right ears and is called the fusiform gyrus (sciencenews.org). This area isn't exclusively used for the identification of faces, although other areas of the brain are active in identifying other objects

Mars Face. Conspiracy theorists saw a face on the surface of Mars as a sign of extra-terrestrial intelligence.



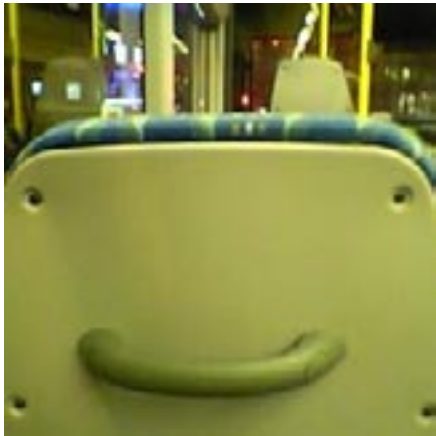


Cloud gazing. The constantly changing shapes of cloud formations make them abundant with faces to be observed.

such as house and cars (Byron Spice 2004). A condition known as prosopagnosia, or face blindness, can occur as a result of damage to this area of the brain (sciencenews.org). Prosopagnosia sufferers cannot distinguish between different faces, severe sufferers cannot even recognise their own face.

Scanning for faces is an extension of a survival strategy that has its beginnings in infancy (C M Bloomer 1976). Newborns have the innate ability to spot basic facial features, such as two eyes situated above a mouth. Evolutionarily the ability to spot and decode faces to discern friend and foe from an early age was essential for survival. Genes now give the human brain a head start in this function (sciencenews.org).

A newborn will only possess a simple blurred representation of facial structure (M H Johnson 2001). Their visual world



is devoid of 'sharp delineations among objects and the nuances of noses, cheeks, and other parts of the facial landscape (sciencenews.org).' Because of this limited visual perception they naturally look toward basic face-like configurations with two eyes above a nose and mouth.

Newborns also like to look at symmetrical faces (lala.essortment.com 2005). Some argue that babies just have an 'innate preference for certain perceptual features such as curved contours' rather than an innate knowledge of faces. Byron Spice believes that babies cannot actually recognise faces, but simply respond to them because of how close mothers and others tend to hold them. But by as early as 4 months old, a baby will make more significant and consistent responses to patterns which resemble the configuration of a human face than to scrambled features (C M Bloomer 1976).

By adulthood we are able to recognise thousands of individual faces. We regard faces as relatively unique, although statistically they are very similar in structure. The differentiation of these thousands of faces takes a large amount of cognitive effort (wikipedia.org).



C McKinsty believes that we simplify facial recognition in terms of how they deviate from a standardized face that is created in your brain.

Another accepted theory of facial perception argues that there are a number of stages involved in recognising a face. Basic perceptual manipulations are used on the sensory information. These are used to derive details about the person such as age, gender or attractiveness. Another stage involves being able to recall meaningful details such as their name and relative past experiences with



the individual from semantic memory (wikipedia.org). These three stages were theorised by V Bruce and A Young. They state that they are three independent sub-processes working in unison.

Therefore as a baby we are already scanning our surroundings for faces. By adulthood we have a firm image of what a face should look like in our brains. So it is not a surprise that we so often find faces in objects, clouds, vegetables and our general surroundings.

People tune their brains to the faces they see the most within the first year of life, hard-wiring a template against which to compare new visages.

C McKinstry 2005





How We Find Faces

Joost Elffers writes that 'looking and seeing can be two entirely different things.' The same stimuli can be regarded with 'countless possible interpretations (Hoffman 1998).' This is 'not to accept the appearance of things at face value, but to creatively see other possibilities using the unlimited resource of our imagination (J Elffers 1997).' Hoffman describes this process of constructing our personal visual experience in the phenomenal sense as our 'visual genius'.

Viewing things in the relational sense is seeing something which exists, but the phenomenal sense is when our brain will make an object. Take for example a psychologists Rorschach ink pattern, our brain can interpret this in a number of ways. Psychologists believe that we see what our unconscious mind wants to see in these inkblots (J Elffers 1997).

Joost Elffers. Finds faces in fruit and vegetables. As published in his book 'Play With Your Food.'





There are different strategies about how the brain can select and organise a jumble of sensory data to arrive at closure. Closure being when the mind has imposed a pattern on the stimulus (C M Bloomer 1976). Closure in this case would be to perceive a face in an object. Detrie writes that closure principle denotes that 'we make whole images from partial visual data'. For example, we see a circular figure with small gaps as a full circle, or perceive a whole figure even if part of this fall on the retinal blind spot. The human brain will always seek closure on an image.

Hoffman states that object parts can be created 'preattentively' across the visual image to complete an image. This closure principle may explain why when we are presented with limited visual stimuli our brain can still construct this into a face. Similarity principle is important in mentally grouping objects. Similarities determine how elements connect. Visual characteristics like size, shape, colour, texture, material and surface can lead objects to be grouped in your mind (T Detrie 2002). When looking at these mentally grouped objects we can regard them as the figure.



Rorschach inkblot. A psychologists test which analyses the interpretation of this figure. A face is a common response.





Peter and Paul goblet. This is an example of a figure ground relationship and alternating figure and ground.

We can consider the viewing of stimuli as figure and ground. This is the visual process by which your brain will decide between which is the object being viewed and which is the background. The Peter and Paul goblet picture is an example of our ability to view 2 different pictures through changing our perception of figure and ground (C M Bloomer 1976). When we view the white area as the figure we can observe a goblet shape. If we alternate this to viewing the black area as the figure and the white as the ground we can see two silhouetted faces looking at each other.

I regard this figure ground relationship to be an important process in the perception of found faces. The ability to concentrate on 3 or 4 objects and regard them as the figure, whilst disregarding the surrounding objects as the ground. Bloomer refers to this process as a 'tune out' of the ground.

This tune out of surrounding objects can emphasise the figure of the face by reducing the clutter of irrelevant visual information. This tune out which you have conducted in your own brain can be emphasised when communicating the image to an audience by reducing the amount of ground by cropping the picture. Francois Robert calls this whole process of tuning out the ground when perceiving a figure as a found face as 'mental cropping'.

Through this method of finding a face in an object you are using your brain to tune out the ground and emphasise the figure, and ultimately finding the best mental crop and angle from which to present the image of the face.

Mental cropping. An example of cropping an image to emphasise a found face.







The Wife and Mother Inlaw. This is an example of alternating figures. The picture can be viewed as a pretty young girl or an old woman.

Bloomer also writes about 'alternating figures'. This is where 2 figures can be interpreted from 1 view. This can be demonstrated by 'The wife and mother inlaw'. Just by shifting our perception slightly we can observe 2 different interpretations of the same figure. This can be applied to found faces when we are looking at an object as the figure.

In Gestalt principle the mind will correct a 'stimulus to fit the best or simplest interpretation and the mind tends to see the stimulus as more correct than it actually is (C M Bloomer 1976).' The mind will distort the perception of the stimulus to be able to satisfactorily classify it into existing category. This process leads to a perceptual prejudice. You meet the stimulus with stereotypes which have already been established, and you will only see the things that reinforce this stereotype. You tune out the things that are not consistent with your stereotypes.

Gestalt theory states that the mind will perceive the simplest possible form. It will also see the best or most correct form that complies with the mind's pre-conceptions. Through this process you will see things 'as your mind thinks they ought to be' (C M Bloomer 1976). According to the Gestaltists, we perceive 'whole configurations before becoming aware of details or component parts.'

So this leads to the perception of found faces from a Gestaltist viewpoint. When for example we view 2 windows evenly spaced with a horizontal pipe below them, our mind will view it as exactly that. However, when we have established a figure within this view and mentally cropped it, then our mind can fit the spacing of the objects into its stereotypical view of the features of a simplified face. Gestaltists state that we perceive visual data in organised or configurational terms where the whole is



more than the sum of the parts (T Detrie 2002). Therefore we will often group objects together to see what our visual imagination wants to see.

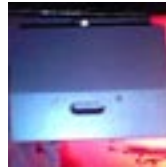
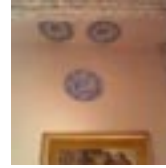
A few of the processes detailed above can be regarded as unconscious activities. But you personally create your own visual world and create its objects and parts (Hoffman 1998). So I believe that using your visual imagination it is possible to concentrate on a group of objects and consciously create an alternate figure from these. This consciousness of the 'unlimited resource of our imagination (J Elffers 1997)' is a powerful perceptual tool. Many of my personal observations have been created when I begin to alternate the visual figures presented before me to entertain myself. It is then a further process of choosing an angle,

a focus, and then cropping the scene to photographically present my own observation to an audience. Often these observations are not obvious as faces until they are presented in a collection of similar photographs.





Francois Robert is a photographer who has an interest in found faces. His book 'Face To Face' contains a collection of studio photos of ordinary objects viewed as faces. (also images on page 24)



Anthropomorphology

When objects appear to possess a face it is often contrived by the designer. This is called anthropomorphic design. Products often contain a face to make them seem human so that we associate with it on a personal level (C Wenham 2001). Anthropomorphic form can be used to express the values of a product, be they personal, social or cultural, and the activities the product supports (DiSalvo, Gemperle 2003). So through your feelings towards a product, you are 'made to serve the interests of a salesman (C Wenham 2001)' because they have given it a face.

Through anthropomorphic design the 'face' of a product can express the attitude that the company wants you to perceive it representing. This is strongly evident in the design of car fronts.

A Nissan dashboard.
Deliberately designed
to look like a face?





Duracell advert. Projection of a feeling onto the plug socket through anthropomorphism.



Examples of car design. The car on the left is a friendly family car. The car on the right is a macho sport utility car.

DiSalvo and Gemperle write that 'few formal cues are necessary for people to anthropomorphize a face. Our convention of two headlights and a radiator grill between them reflect the appearance of two eyes and a mouth.' Japanese people especially view the front of their cars as faces (gocreate.com 2005). The attribute of a vehicle will be visually communicated through the manifestation of the anthropomorphic facial expression of the car front. For example an off-road truck which will want a tough image will have straight rectangular headlights, and an angular grill to represent an aggres-

sive face; whereby a family town car will have curved headlights and a rounded grill to represent a soft amiable face.

Anthropomorphic design of product faces can lead to projection. 'Projection is a psychological phenomenon in which one projects their feelings upon others, animals or objects. (lala.essortment.com 2005)' So by either consciously or subconsciously perceiving the face of a product, you will have projected a personality and feelings to an object. For example, someone may not want to give up their car to the scrap heap because



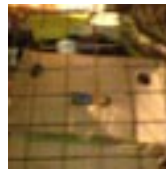
Meary. A Japanese craze where eye stickers could be applied to an object to create a face.

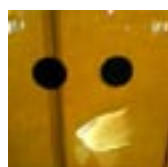
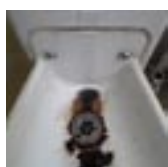
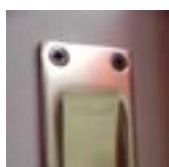
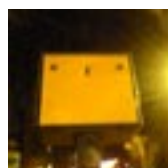
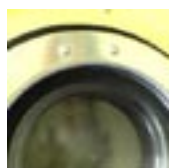
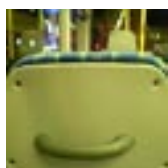
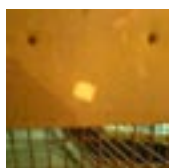
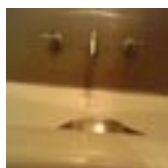
they are afraid they'll hurt its feelings (C Wenham 2001). Indeed the definition of anthropomorphic forms are 'non-living objects that reflect human-like qualities (DiSalvo, Gemperle 2003),' so it is easy to see why we could project human emotions to them.

Many found faces have usually been subtly designed anthropomorphically to make users interact with the objects emotionally. Other objects can be anthropomorphised with simple additions. Meary was a Japanese craze where identical cartoon eye stickers could be applied to ordinary objects to give them a cute face (S Portugal 2002). This product allowed users to customise their environments and project emotion to ordinary objects. Meary could be conceived as a form of found face. The user must have already seen the potential for a face in the object before applying the stickers.

We humans are a self-centred race. We see ourselves in everything. We assign identities and emotions where none exist, and we make the world over in our image.

S McCloud 1993





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