

Gert Germeraad's question.

August Strindberg's short story *A Criminal* is on the surface concerned with a trial following an uxoricide. The judge refers to a medical report investigating whether the accused is someone who might be, as "the latest science" regards, "predestined" to criminality. The accused is, however, not placed in this category, since his cranium:

is neither asymmetrical nor deformed, his wits are fully normal, so that his eyes are neither afflicted with strabismus (wall-eye) nor daltonism (color blindness), nor does his sense of hearing display any deficiency, nor of smell or taste, and all the functions of his body and soul have been deemed normal.....

Strindberg writes that the face of the accused:

was dauntless and fresh and ill-suited for hair and beard, whereby the man appeared masked. To be sure, his mouth, nose, eyes and ears stood sharply detached from each other, as in lowly individuals in whom the harmony of the organs of sense had not yet established itself; but none of them protruded disturbingly at the cost of the other, which might give hint of an impaired equilibrium. His eyes were deeply set, as though they had long ceased to function outwardly and had turned inward so as to avoid seeing; and above his eyebrows the characteristic folds had assumed a winged form, as a result of his occupation with tormenting thoughts or chronic pains while endeavoring to decipher a foreign tongue, a child's babble or other incomprehensibilities. His forehead was normal and, relative his face, neither too high nor low; nothing in the man's appearance betrayed a poorly balanced human organism.

The case for equating wall-eye or color blindness with lawlessness has long been discarded. Yet similar notions have played a large role in human attempts to understand The Other by studying the face. These notions occur in the writings of theoreticians and researchers as diverse as the Greek philosopher Hippocrates and the nineteenth-century criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso; they also play a significant, yet unperceived, role in our daily lives and what we consider "common sense". Concepts, notions and assumptions slip into our discourse and, subsequently, into our ideation and values. They influence our opinions through bypassing our conscious awareness and critical faculties. We do not see them as theories; instead, we have unreflectively incorporated fragments and aspects of them into our knowledge of the world. Still commonly influential are, for example, Freud's theories concerning everything from child rearing to sexuality. Words such as "subconscious" and "Oedipal complex" are still applied categorically.

Various ways to read faces.

Strindberg was well aware of the works of Lombroso while writing *Life in the Skerries*. But when we talk of rubbing our "genius bumps" or brand someone as "thick-headed", we are hardly cognizant of the fact that these expressions are the detritus of a pseudoscience championed by Joseph Gall or Anders Retzius. These are just two of the scientists who some two centuries ago classified humans according to their physical attributes. Classifying is unfortunately rarely free from moralizing; comparing and sorting human subjects never remains value-neutral. When the shape of a head, the features of a face, or the color and texture of hair deviate from the norm of familiarity, our judgmental nature begins to regard the norm as superior, the deviant as inferior. Ethnically and culturally.

A face can reveal structural, dynamic and artificial qualities. The first include the height of the forehead, the weight of the eyelids, the distance between the ears, the thickness of the lips and the size of the nose. Dynamic qualities are those expressed in a shy smile, a furrowed brow, an ironic grimace or a blink of the eye, that is, a change of expression. Artificial qualities include make-up, facial ornaments, piercing or tattoos. Qualities can work in conjunction; false eyelashes can enhance a glance and cosmetics can conceal hollows.

Interpreting the human face based on its structural qualities has a long and dubious tradition. Not without reason, its sciences—physical anthropology, phrenology and racial biology—regularly fall into disrepute. Lombroso may have attracted interest from the psychologically inclined intellectuals of the day, such as Strindberg. But the questionable scientific methodology of its diagnostics grant it today no more than historical interest.

Discrimination, based on either an intuitive or a systematic diagnosis of the face, lacks all scientific support, yet still exists. The Carl Huter Institut in Zürich, Switzerland, propagates what it terms psychophysognomy. Its founder and director, Fritz Aerni, regularly publishes physiognomic analyses of celebrities and leading politicians, such as EU President Herman Van Rompuy, President Barack Obama, Pope Benedict XVI and tennis pro Nadja Petrova.

An artist reads faces.

It is commonly held that by studying a human face, we can probe that person's true self. Gert Germeraad, working principally with sculptures in clay and bronze, seeks out varied sources—images, fragments, even scientific theories—before shaping his portraits, thereby bringing into question the ways in which we interpret faces. His lifelong project addresses the seminal question, Can we understand individuals by studying their facial features? And he provides a comprehensive analysis through his artistic elucidation. His aim is in part to challenge our prejudgments, in part to cultivate his interest in portraiture in the broadest sense. He says:

"The attempts to understand, to unveil, the character and intentions of other people have resulted in generalized interpretations and classifications of facial features, bodies and postures. Throughout history, the theories that have formulated a link between appearance and personality traits have often had dire consequences. They have survived into our high-tech age, in which our fear of terror, criminality and violence leave us with the question: Can the physical appearance of the strangers I encounter reveal their intentions?"

The art of reading faces through the ages.

Face-reading, and its relation to character and personality, is as ancient as the Greek orator and physiognomist Polemon of Laodicia. Siang Mien, the Chinese art of face-reading practiced for over two millennia, evidences a powerful influence from the concepts of yin and yang. Yin represents the feminine principle and affects the right side of the face, while yang, the masculine principle, is said to rule the left. Both halves of the face require balancing. The face is further divided into three zones. The forehead was thought to mirror the mental capacity of the individual; the area between brow and tip of nose spoke of one's ability to surmount obstacles and rule over one's fate; while the area between nose and chin determined how well suited one was to meet old age.

In *Physiognomics and The History of Animals*, Aristotle contended that a person who resembled a certain animal possessed the same's temperament. Those sporting the meaty ears of an ox were, therefore, indolent. A broad nose, which resembled the snout of a pig, belied stupidity, whereas the nose of a snake was a sign of magnanimity. Aristotle's ideas survived into the seventeenth century, where they were picked up by the polymath Giambattista della Porta and the artist Charles le Brun. These, too, correlated the appearance of humans and animals – the leonine was as courageous as its counterpart, the goatish as stupid. And clever were those who had the pointed nose and aspect of a fox.

Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, was engrossed in the changes in the face as one approached death: how the nose would turn pointed, the eyes grow sunken, the skin stretched and sallow. He was also interested in the theory of humoralism and the four human humors: the sanguine or carefree, the choleric or bad tempered, the melancholic or despondent, and the phlegmatic or unemotional.

Gert Germeraad has produced four large ceramic sculptures entitled *The Four Humors*. One of the guards at an exhibition of this series was assigned to ask viewers if they could determine which humor each head represented. Most often they believed they could. When the guard took exception to these claims, many viewers began to doubt or revise their earlier opinions.

The breakthrough for physiognomy occurred in Europe at the end of the 18th century, when Johann Caspar Lavater published several books on the art of reading faces. By 1940 his four-volumed *Essays in Physiognomy* had been issued in 150 editions. His ideas are persistent.

Lavater advanced the notion that the careful study of the various parts of the face could reveal an individual's inner secrets. But he drew his conclusions based on elementary similarities. Rectilinear facial features indicate rectitude. Coarse hair, eyebrows rough pores are signs that the owner of the face has a coarse character. A high forehead signifies intelligence, while a prominent nose suggests a strong will. The shape of the nose bespeaks sensitivity; that of the lips gentleness or wrath, love or hatred; and that of the chin sensuality. Not without sincerity, Lavater believed that physiognomy could be applied for the improvement of mankind.

By the early nineteenth century, physiognomy was reinvented by Franz Josef Gall. The methodology, first called *cranioscopy*, which attempted to link the character of a subject to the shape of his skull, was later elaborated into *phrenology*. This pseudoscience maintains that human personalities consist of a set of different mental faculties, each of which is located in a different area of the brain. The larger the area, the greater the faculty. By measuring the various bumps and indentations of the cranial bone, an individual's mental capacities, character and temperament could be ascertained. One bump for proficiency in mathematics, another for morals, a third for language acquisition. The phrase "genius bumps" is a remnant of phrenologic jargon.

Persistent ideas.

In 2003 Gert Germeraad began work on a series of sculptures based on a book on physiognomy, published in the 1950's by the Germans Bürger and Nöttling. Without even critically reviewing their starting point (that the face is the mirror of the soul), the authors circulate the notion that "a thin upper lip demonstrates a strict and dour nature". The work contains hundreds of photographs of people that illustrate and support their ideas. The artist Gert Germeraad, seeing through such jaundice, sculpted the images as lifelike as possible. This resulted in busts of everyday people bearing ordinary faces. The captions from the authors' book were then taken and reused verbatim.

These ceramic sculptures, painted in naturalistic colors, often befuddled visitors. Some of whom took the captions at face value and concurred with them. Others maintained with certainty that the captions were misleading. Ironically, by substantiating the prejudices of the captions, viewers were given the chance to reflect on their own deeply rooted norms. Sure, an aristocratic nose is nobler than a squat nose! And that fellow whose forehead resembles a chimp couldn't be much smarter! And what a sour puss that one must be, with that sour puss and all!

As mentioned, Strindberg was influenced by the ideas of Cesare Lombroso. On the grounds of anthropometric data, the latter believed that lawbreakers constituted a developmental throwback. They possessed certain biological traits that revealed themselves not only in criminal behavior, but in atavistic mental and physical characteristics: a thick cranium, powerful jaws, bushy eyebrows, large ears, as well as the inability to blush or grow bald.

In the Gestapo archives in Vienna, Gert Germeraad has found photographs of people branded as criminals. The Polish farm-hand Felix Oginsky was arrested at his workplace in Velm, Lower Austria, for work refusal. For this, he was registered on June 27, 1940 with the Identification Department of the Vienna Gestapo. Other unfortunate victims include the Polish farm-hand Katharina Dobocz, who was subsequently transferred to Ravensbrück and the Greek mechanic Konstantin Theologu, who died in Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp. The images of these destitute migrants inspired Gert Germeraad to a series of sculptures called "Depicting Criminals", which brings into question the picture we have of criminals, and how we all too often simplistically define them.

Swedish face-readers and the ugly face of racism.

The Swedish anatomist Anders Retzius (1796-1860) was affiliated with the Karolinska Institute, where he collaborated with the chemist Jacob Berzelius in its reorganization and in defense of modern medical research. A pioneer in his field, Retzius is considered the first modern brain researcher. Naturally, he addressed the trend of phrenological studies. Retzius was critical of the phrenology of Gall, pointing out its methodological imprecision. But he never once questioned its foundations, that is, the almost literal correspondence between soul and skull. Working in the field of physical anthropology, Retzius himself classified people by the shapes of their heads. They could be dolichocephalic, or long-skulled; or brachycephalic, or short-skulled. The former type, commonest in northern Europe, represents a stage of greater development. The latter type, prevalent among the Celts, the Basques and the Samis, represents a more primitive stage. Classification by cranium would later find its way into racial biology.

By the start of the twentieth century, physiognomy and racial biology were on the rise in Sweden. In the summer of 1919, folk type exhibitions were held throughout the country. In charge was Herman Lundborg, genetics researcher and racial biologist at Uppsala University, who also sat on the jury of a competition to crown a "Swedish-Teutonic ideal racial type". Tore Frängsmyr reports that the "winner was an exemplary bicycle repairman from Skövde, who would later represent the Swedish ideal in a publication issued by the Institute for Racial Biology." In 1921, Lundborg was named professor and head of the Institute. The first of its kind in the world, this governmental agency, founded with collective political support, undertook its mission by collecting data on several hundred thousand Swedes, mostly conscripted military, but even school children, hospital patients and prisoners. Alongside family background, height and weight, the Institute also measured shoulder width, pelvic width, nasal length and width, eye color, hair color, facial hair, back hair and pubic hair. The goal was to define a "correct" appearance. But its measuring points proved to be as scientifically ridiculous as its racial motives were morally abominable.

Modern geneticists and evolutionary biologists, such as Svante Pääbo, have indisputably demonstrated that it is impossible to detect distinguishable differences between ethnic groups. Genetic variations within a group are at least as significant as between groups. Pääbo maintains that no genetic characteristics common to an ethnicity exist—the term "race" is thus biologically useless. Individual genetic differences notwithstanding, we all share the same gene sequences. This is hardly strange; we have all evolved from a tiny set of homonids; we are all one family. History has shown us the danger of making sweeping statements about races. We need only be reminded of Auschwitz.

When asked whether it is possible to derive character from face, Gert Germeraad would have us answer

no. He is in good company. Shakespeare has King Duncan in Macbeth deny the possibility of reading faces: "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face." For Gert Germeraad, however, a simple no will not suffice. The riddle his art poses cannot countenance a simple answer. It demands that we reflect upon our own impressions and presumptions, as well as upon the shady relics of our cultural heritage. And it demands that we ask ourselves what it would mean should we answer yes.

References

Quotes from August Strindberg *En brottsling* are taken from *Skärkarlsliv* published first in 1888.

Translation Kevin Fickling.

An overview of research on physiognomy and racial biology can be found for example

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Graves, Joseph L. (2003). *The Emperor's New Clothes. Biological Theories of Race at the Millenium*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press

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Lavater (1775-78) *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (four volumes).

The book which was the basis of Gert Germeraads sculptur series from 2003 is:

Burger-Villinge, R. & Nöthling, W. (1958) *Das Geheimnis der Menschenform, Lehrbuch der Menschenkenntnis auf Grund der Anlagenfeststellung*. Burger-Verlag OHG. Wuppertal-Barmen, Tyskland

Translation from Swedish: Kevin Fickling