

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Edkins, Jenny.** *Face Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2015, 230 pp., \$43.67 CDN, paper (978-0-415-67218-4).

The human face is a pervasive and powerful component of everyday life, yet research on this body part is just short of absent in the social sciences. Borrowing from philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, visual studies (including work on photography and art), surveillance studies and the sociology of the body, Jenny Edkins' *Face Politics* skillfully weaves an interdisciplinary account which shows how faces exercise power in modern society.

While the core text is relatively short (171 pages), *Face Politics* is a meticulously researched work detailing contemporary debates in the philosophy and natural science of the human face. Edkins' analysis of this literature yields a post-structuralist theory that challenges the reader's "common sense" about the face, encouraging them to inquire: "what is the face anyway?" (xvi). Beginning from this question, Edkins contributes a comprehensive update to Deleuze and Guatarri's 1980 theory of "faciality", which posits that *the face is produced socially and is inherently political*. In short, Edkins thesis is that face politics produces individuals as visual objects of administration, where personhood and subjectivity are taken as isolated, unchanging, categorizable and knowable. Edkins weighs post-structuralist theory against findings in the natural sciences to challenge this perception: faces are not corporeal emblems of individualism, but rather, the face is inherently a site of empathy that evokes our interconnectedness to others.

Central to Edkins account of face politics is that faces possess an *excess of meaning* in modern culture – they are a "black hole of subjectivity", as Deleuze and Guatarri (1987: 189) put it. In the opening chapter, Edkins demonstrates how photography and portraiture exploit this excess to evoke emotional responses from the viewer. The centerpiece of this section is Suzanne Opton's *Soldier Billboard Project*, involving photographs of real soldier's faces bearing blank stares, framed horizontally as if the subject were lying down. These portraits were accompanied by the caption "SOLDIER", and displayed on billboards throughout the United States, drawing controversy over their resemblance to death. Edkins employs this case study to show how "our viewing is coloured" by the tradition of portraiture and social categories derived from visual

and cultural memory (27). For example, rarely do we see faces presented horizontally (unless with loved ones) (20); for this reason, the sideways face tends to evoke intimacy, sympathy and vulnerability in our culture. Edkins argues that the visceral reactions to *Soldier* were, therefore, less about war, and more about the face (34).

The remainder of chapter 1 looks at photographic works meant to challenge our “automatic readings” of photographs and faces. While these shorter case studies are provocative, they are not as robust as Edkins’ analysis of *Soldier*. The reader risks being overwhelmed as the author explores these works while simultaneously grappling with the ideas of Barthes and Sontag, among other theorists. Nonetheless, Edkins’ core arguments are clear: she challenges Sontag’s popular contention that photographs or portraits are a “neutral” visual representation in which the viewer inscribes meaning (39). Instead, Edkins argues that faces complicate the objectivity of the image: while there is no automatic reading of the face, there is ample scientific evidence that human perception privileges facial aesthetics over other imagery. Edkins’ objective here is to establish the face as a critical site of emotion: faces possess a narrative force that invites our gaze and evokes our empathy. This is how faces exercise power.

The second chapter, “Moving Faces”, looks at research on the physical or observable expression (the “materiality”) of emotion. Here Edkins poses the question: does it make sense to talk about emotion as distinct or separate from the body and the face (61)? For her the answer is *no*. Edkins maintains that there is no universal reading of emotion through the face, but directly challenges proponents of emotional theory who analyze emotions inwardly, without considering their “outwardly” physical expression. For Edkins, to exclude materiality is to ignore the politics of emotions, that is, how automatic biological responses are modified and regulated by social environments (63). Subsequently, Edkins convincingly argues that there is no clear distinction between the inwardly and outwardly expression of emotions, even though the face seems to occupy this divide. Furthermore, recent findings in neurobiology show that affect is not individualistic: observing the emotions of others and experiencing emotion ourselves share common neural activity, suggesting that humans are fundamentally sympathetic creatures. Edkins argues that humans react to objects in a similar way – we can imagine the sensation of experiencing objects, and this is what makes humans “feel” for art-work and photographs (81, 83).

“Moving Faces” poses intriguing questions about emotion and the body, but portions of the chapter diverge from the book’s central focus, as readers may be left wondering where faces fit within emotional theory.

However, part of Edkins' objective here is to draw attention *away* from the face as the "black hole of subjectivity".

The next section returns to the question of faciality, that is, how faces are produced through apparatuses of power (97). The first half looks at photo identification and facial recognition technology, where faces are appropriated as a substitute for the living person (105). Edkins challenges the everyday reliance on this body part as an object of truth and knowledge of personhood by analyzing the condition of "prosopagnosia" – the inability to recognize familiar faces, also known as "face blindness". For these individuals, faces never guarantee identity – the prosopagnosic person must constantly work to know and remember every individual they encounter. Even then, people are never whole or complete, knowledge of their being is always fragmented, always *becoming*. Edkins' point is that those with face blindness are not really "blind", but rather, they see the face as *dismantled*, as a disconnected series of bodily features, rather than a coherent social assemblage. Edkins finds value in perceiving faces in this way, and argues that face politics is the screen in which identity and personhood mistakenly appears stable and complete – a form of perception that reinforces the status quo, such as the power of state identification practices (127).

In the concluding section, "Facelessness", Edkins examines how people cope with facial disfigurement resulting from accidents or war (also called "face difference") (147). While *mentally* unchanged, those with facial difference describe how their face *becomes* their identity, serving as a burden in social interaction. For many, the response is to undergo surgical procedures that can cost patients their physical health and a shortened lifespan (158, 164). As Edkins observes, this highlights the fundamental meaning we assign to face and personhood, as facial reconstruction surgery is about optimizing *social* survival; disfigurement is only a problem because of the way we respond to it – faces are not particularly important for physical health (164). For Edkins, the gravity of face politics – as the corporeal site of empathy – means that few images are more disturbing than the disfigured face. According to Edkins, we see ourselves in the Other: the disfigured face is the *dismantled* face, which dispels the screen of face politics and reminds us of our mortality, vulnerability and interconnectedness as living beings.

The core themes of the text come full circle in the concluding chapter, yet readers may find that *Face Politics* ends somewhat abruptly, as there is no concluding summary to tie up the book's theoretical complexities. However, Edkins' objective is not to advance a definitive account of "face politics", but rather, her point is to *denaturalize* the face in order to challenge the embodied categories of personhood, individual-

ity, and subjectivity that we take for granted in everyday life – and she is immensely successful at doing so. *Face Politics* is an intriguing text that coincides with a wide array of scholarly and scientific interests, and Edkins makes a compelling case for re-thinking the human face and positioning it at the center of analysis.

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#### REFERENCES

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guatarri. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (B. Massumi Trans.). Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

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