

ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

ALIEN-EFFECT
ENCOUNTERS OF AN OTHER KIND ENTIRELY_



FRANÇOIS-DAVID SEBBAH

But who has a face? To tell the truth,

“to have,” “to be” or rather “to make” a “face” evokes [*suscite*] the “who,” performs it. To make a face [*faire face*] makes the “who,” makes it so that there is a “who” rather than a “what.” It is a matter of performance and of experience first – the substance comes afterwards, it follows (if one ever wants to – *perhaps* one can do without it...).

Actually we really shouldn’t wonder if the great ape – always as this specific great ape, not any other – does, or does not have a face; nor if the bird (as this bird), nor the horse, nor the bacteria perhaps; nor the autonomous anthropomorphic (or not) robot, nor the cyborg of your dreams.

Go, experience it first, and this experience decides: sometimes “it makes a face,” and it is no longer “it,” but “who.” You object that one could make a mistake, or be deceived. Everyone could make a mistake – or be deceived. As a matter of fact, that ultimately doesn’t count at the level on which I am speaking: in every manner perhaps there is an “evil demon” and nothing is what it seems to be; perhaps the others are zombies who appear to be endowed with life, with experiences, with feelings when they are not, that they may boil down to this mere appearance; perhaps we all always already in the Matrix like in the hit film of the same name... well, anyway...

This skepticism doesn't start at all from the experience of which I speak – and in this experience, it is the trial [*épreuve*] that decides, that decides if there is a “someone” for “me,” that determines him (or her, or they [*ille*]...), that determines me as well: the “substance” that you sense yourself to be (“I am, I exist, etc....”) is determined in the performance of this trial which at all times falls on you, which you do not choose – it is this trial that chooses you (and it matters little if there is or is not deception; true and false come after, *after the emergence of sense* [*sens*]).

So who has a face? The question thus refuses to be treated in terms either ontological or gnoseological (true/false, certain/uncertain, appearance/being) – it transports us straight away to another regime of existence and of thought: we could call it ethics (despite the risks of misunderstandings). Accept this, agree to let yourself be transported to this other terrain; to tell the truth, it is the one where you were born.

Whether or not we are mistaken – really leave that to the side, we do not care about this – here is the story, it is true in a sense, true of a truth that precedes the opposition between the true and the false.

A face comes to you in your fear of death – this fear that you have of dying, of your death, with which you are obsessed – it reverses it into a prohibition against murder. Thus, it disarms you. Perhaps it even hyperbolizes itself so that from the negative commandment you pass already to the positive commandment to assist and even to a kenosis of disinterest! We could discuss it. But this much is certain, the proto-trial is this: you want to live and to continue to live, you, entirely like me, you begin as this “wickedness of wanting to die last,” and, at a moment, like that, in the course of your life (that is to say always already, if you are “in the sense”) it reverses: it is no longer this that matters to you, you are no longer ready to tread upon others to save your skin (*at least*, you are no

longer ready to do it without being split in two by *guilt*, and that the bad conscience is “Good!”); what matters will be: to kill not, to wound not, and also to aid, to preserve. Of course, of course, you are like me, you are not a saint – without a doubt you often do want to save your own skin, or that of those with whom you are close, *first*. But you know now that this egoism, which is unwaveringly you, is not all of you, and even that you are born elsewhere, that you emerge as someone truly other-wise than this *conatus*, this effort to persevere yourself, which you never cease to be; and so there is some sense.

A face, this is not – or not only or not first – plastic forms, a triangle (eye, nose, mouth) that expresses the emotions, which reflects a “soul,” as we say. A face is not at all, but really not at all, that which we have in common, our “other human beings:” contrary to what you believe, and what we do not cease to hint to you, other humans do not make faces for you because they are like you, because they are your fellow beings; but because they are others. “To be other,” what does that mean? It means having the remarkable authority to reverse your egoism when you come to the call for help from vulnerability itself (sometimes petitioned, sometimes enveloped in the ceremonial dress of force in majesty, but always there, as soon as there is an other). It turns out that it happens to you exemplarily before that triangle; but honestly, I do not believe that this is so because there is something “common,” some “resemblance” of this triangle to that which you are, and no more because you could then identify yourself, or project yourself (empathy, sympathy...) – at best we will eventually concede certain “operations” of this type, but this is not the challenge itself; should we not even, on the contrary, understand that the trial of the face reverses all these traits, all these traits that leave and return to the Same? “To make a face” if it calls for help – and “it” becomes

“who” – ; and this call to help, if there is a living being [*vivant*] who, always demands to continue, to continue to live. (You will note in the passage the little irony of the story: that which selects you [*t’élit*] as “someone,” that which makes you exist of a significant existence because reversed or diverted from its egoistic contortion [*crispation*], is the other, other for you precisely because it is for itself entirely the egoistic effort to preserve its own being.)

Let us concede this, a human face is hyperbolically such a call – at least we have this experience – but nothing, nothing would justify making some human face the holder of the privilege of being the face as such, of being the only and exclusive performance of the face. I remember a biologist friend telling me how moving it was to see, by microscope, a cell struggling while its membrane was breached; seeing it try to mend itself, successfully or not: *almost* a face perhaps... In any case, nothing justifies confiscating the face in favor of the only human species: it is not human being (in the sense of the membership in a species, in the sense of membership in a sector of an ontological furnishings [*mobilier ontologique*]), which determines some face, which give a face, on the contrary, it is “to make a face” which renders “human” (but in an integrally renewed sense compared to those who are “bequeathed” [*légues*] to us). And this can happen far beyond the limit of human “species” or “gender,” beyond “that (those) which we resemble,” since nothing of the being, of the characteristics of such or such substance in the being determines it. A face, that is not the security of the well-known, it is the very experience [*épreuve*] of the excess in all possible identification – disturbance of its proper form as of the horizon of your expectation. (And so “human” should mean an entirely different thing than that which biology, and also the human sciences or the sciences of man teach us. One could, without merely paying lip service [*se payer de mots*], just by playing out description

schemes between them, in passing from one to the other, show how many inhumans are humans, and how many humans sometimes lack humanity itself... Or again, how many must be held [*tenir*] together in a *certain* “humanity” – but, if you don’t mind, we will play this game another time.)

What makes a “face?” Prévert’s List, Borges’ List! All the animals, all living *beings*, *more or less* certainly. And the list does not stop there. Remember our initial effort – that we permitted this displacement of ground [*terrain*] where the question of true and false no longer governs – , remember also that, in the same movement, we established that the criterion of ontological appearance decides nothing: we don’t have a face because we are human but instead the human performs itself as soon as it makes a face; and nothing of “that which is” decides *a priori* to this trial-performance (and it does not matter, at a certain level, in a certain sense, whether the trial is misleading or not). The consequence? *From this point of view*, the door is wide open! Extra-terrestrial lives (alive/lived) [(*vivantes/vécues*)]? Of course, why not! Lives (alive/lived) *emerging* from steel, from silicone and/or from code – one hardly believes it, but no matter what we believe true or false, that is not the question!

Thus, you like me, we are not each “someone” except as *the effect* of the encounter with the face, and nothing *a priori* limits the field of possibilities for this encounter.

I would like to add a word apropos of this encounter. Of course, it is part of the event; it may be, perhaps, the event *par excellence*, even when wrapped in the coat of the ordinary, of the everyday, and tends sometimes (but not necessarily) to doze off, as it were. This could occur no matter the time, no matter the place, just like that, around a corner. But

to truly say, on another side, as long as you are in the sense, in the significance, this meeting has always already taken place; from a certain point of view it doesn't happen (empirically, in the time of the world); or rather, it has always already arrived: the event of the other is "in you;" this grain of madness, this crack, this great outside, is in you, it makes you "you." Always already you respond "here I am" to the call which is exteriority itself as the most intimate; the call which gives you this interiority that you are qua a witness to this call (when you are "someone," someone irreducible to the egoistic contortion that you also inevitably are). Yes, without overdramatizing, one could say that that you are its "hostage;" not in the sense of being taken by it, but in the sense of always already being taken in its place, or rather even, of always already being inhabited or haunted by him, through this call, this face which calls, which overturns you, reverses you, turns you away from yourself and makes you, thus, "you," you and no other as the very witness of such a *diversion* [*détournement*], as such an anarchic disappropriation [*dé-prise*], without beginning [*commencement*].

Alius, alien, if you like, in your beating heart; *alius, alien* which is no being determined in advance, the traits of which are not fixed like those of certain beings rather than of others, pure unidentifiable performance of this call from beyond being (that which goes much further than the edges of your galaxy – far from another kind, encounter of an other kind entirely, of the Wholly Other [*Tout Autre*] of every kind!). Unpredictable of the encounter (no *prejudice* could ever prevail), always already in your heart.

"You" are but the effect; you are but the performer of its *alien* performance, of unidentifiable, at the point that it does not alienate you – it does not alienate you in the common sense of the term, because it truly alienates you. In effect, you are the hostage, it is you "which appears to the other" as the dictionary says, you are *Alien*, but then the regime of

appearance has always already exploded: one-for-the-other where property does not reign.

It commands without tyranny, it gives birth to you as this “here I am” that comes forth, performance of this testimony (before this or that determined response attached to a situation). And you bring yourself forward as this *conatus* always already cracked and open, always already in the significance within the very heart of uncertainty (lights or darkness to come in a fluttering of eyelashes – who knows?).