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The Morphology of Eyebrows in Works by Giovan Battista della Porta and Cesare Lombroso

In the last decades, the theory and history of physiognomy have met with a renewed critical interest, in the light of the pictorial turn discussed by William Mitchell. (2005, 28–56) Physiognomy uses verbal language to explain the morphology of the body, and this in turn depicts a syntax of personality and behavior, also thanks to the analogy between humans and animals. It is a complex system which combines the observation of images with a verbal description, and which needs to be studied considering perceptual and visual the conditioning; these are not natural dates, but cultural constructions which are learnt and cultivated with time, as the art historian Ernst Gombrich (1963, 45–55) noted.

In a memorable essay, entitled *On Physiognomic Perception* (1960), Gombrich highlighted the importance and flaws of physiognomy in the history of the Western mindset. The essay can be said to represent the change of physiognomy being no longer a science with interpreting ambitions,¹ but rather an object of privileged study for theorists of perception, art historians, scholars of aesthetics, philosophy and literature, and more recently, of visual studies. This interlaced knowledge shows the density of a discipline which has shaped the stereotypes of the acknowledgement of the Other (and its misinterpretations) through a minute classification of body parts linked to personality. As an example, we can think of the fundamental literary value of this repertoire of words and images: how can we imagine Ulysses, Calypso, Moses, Christ, the Virgin Mary, just to mention some figures

¹ In Italy, for example, the list of physiognomic essays with scientific ambitions is said to have concluded with *La fisionomia nell'arte e nella scienza* (Firenze: Sansoni 1952) written by anthropologist Alfredo Niceforo (1952), of the Lombroso school of thought.

who have a face and a body only by our physiognomic way of reasoning? Together with prosopography (that is, the psychophysical study of the relevant figures of the past), a physiognomic culture can be seen in the description of characters characterized by a coherent system of flesh, bones and personality, prompting the reader to complete a mental picture of words which will never be visible in a real situation. This mixing of codes is a feature of ekphrasis, the verbal representation of a visual representation, according to what Mitchell presented (1994, 152–154) with a complexity similar to the physiognomy of a novel.

Without any doubt, literary characters (especially the ones of novels, because of the longer system of narration) play an important perceptive role, as they work as mediators, as compasses for the knowledge of the other, to verify in a face-to-face reality. However, it is not always easy to understand if and how writers are aware of physiognomy: the case of Honoré de Balzac, reader of Johann Kaspar Lavater, its occurrence is isolated and therefore fascinating.² Probably, and generally, the physiognomic culture circulated thanks to essays which shaped a widespread perceptive sensitivity, even when they were not read. The starting point was Greece, in the third century B.C., when Aristotle's disciples (Aristotle 1913, 46–70) wrote a treaty, a physiognomic essay to analyze the different parts of *soma*, creating important analogies, offering effective classifications, establishing at once a set of methodological principles and thorny issues.

For example, we can consider the similarity between man and animal, which still stands as the grounds of our discourse on personalities; we say “as cunning as a fox,” “as strong as a lion,” “as solitary as a bear,” “as greedy as a pig,” “as calm as a dove,” and so on. In the centuries, zoomorphism has been considered trustworthy because animals do not lie: body and soul match with no simulation or dissimulation, therefore there is a clear knowledge of the link between the exterior and the interior of the animal. Even more importantly, it can be applied to humans: those who show morphological similarities with a specific animal will almost certainly own the same type of personality. (Baltrusaitis 1957, 8–46) In Aristotelian terms, there is a specific distinction between fixed traits – bones, the shape and colour of eyes, the shape of ears, complexion, all the unchanging parts

2 On the relationship between physiognomy and the novel, particularly in the 18th and 19th century, a core text is Tytler, Graeme. 1982. *Physiognomy in the European Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Recommended texts are also: Gaudio, Alessandro. 2011. *Lavorare con gli attrezzi del vicino. La fisiognomica scientifica al vaglio della letteratura*. Pisa: ETS; La Manna, Federica. 2012. *Sineddoche dell'anima. Il volto nel dibattito tedesco del Settecento*. Milano – Udine: Mimesis.

(clearly considering the absence of plastic surgery) – and mobile traits, that is, the body parts which differ day by day, or rather, which change minute by minute: laughter, cry, gestures, looks. The interpretation of mobile traits is immediately considered difficult, unsure, not trustworthy, because it is unstable and can be subjected to fiction: how can one differentiate between the expressions of a brave man and a cheeky man? Furthermore, there is the possibility that a usually happy man might have a sad day, just like someone who is habitually sad could be happy for a few hours. In both cases, their faces would show the signs of momentary passion, making alterations to the habitual ones. (Aristotle 1913, 50)

All things considered, there is a way to avoid a physiognomic mistake. The pseudo-Aristotelian physiognomy known in Europe in a Latin version edited by Bartolomeo da Messina in the 13th century³ specifies that it is not enough to choose fixed traits or find a similarity with an animal; what needs to be found is coherence between multiple clues to confirm a physiognomic conjecture. On the one hand, this means that the risk of misunderstanding caused by mobile traits is lowered; on the other, it implies that a high number of common features must be looked for, by identifying, for example, the ones of ethnic identity: for a Pseudo-Aristotle, skin colour would signal brave or coward people, thus starting a first classification of the people of the North (Scythians) and of the South (Egyptians and Ethiopians).

How can the racist danger of a physiognomic prejudice not be seen? However, it would be unfair to only consider the limits of this discipline which deserves the merit of being the first to show the exemplifying value of stereotypes: this is beautiful and good (*kaloskagathia*), this is ugly and bad (the so-called *theiormorphism*). For its effort of classification with a reassuring effect, physiognomy has crossed the centuries with no special issues, reaching the 17th century, an important period where traditional disciplines lived together with a new hypothesis on the passion of individuals (promoted by the French philosopher René Des-

3 Bartolomeo da Messina was the Greek-to-Latin translator at Manfredi's Sicilian court between 1258 and 1266. The *Editio princeps* della *Physiognomonica* dates from 1472, and has been reprinted several times in later centuries. For the importance of pseudo-Aristotelian physiognomy in history, recommended texts are Magli, Patrizia. 1995. *Il volto e l'anima. Fisiognomica e passioni*. Milano: Bompiani; Porter, Martin. 2005. *Windows of the Soul: Physiognomy in European Culture, 1470–1780*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Gurisatti, Giovanni. 2006. *Dizionario fisiognomico. Il volto, le forme, l'espressione*. Macerata: Quodlibet analyzes some of the fields of application (portrait, caricature, actors, word, writing, opera, history, and metropolis) of the physiognomic reasoning.

cartes). As a matter of fact, it was one of the many cultural wonders of the 17th century, together with the study of the sky (with Galileo Galilei) and of universal gravitation (with Isaac Newton); together with the research on modern languages, witnessed in Italy by the first edition of the *Vocabolario della Crusca* (1612); together with the birth of some literary genres of great fame, like the drama in music (later called melodrama), the fairy tale (at first an oral tradition, later established in the collections by Gianbattista Basile and Charles Perrault) and the novel (in its various forms, from Spanish and German picaresque adventures to love mishaps, for example *La princesse de Clèves* by Madame de La Fayette); together with Caravaggio's chiaroscuro, Carracci's caricatures, Bernini's and Borromini's moving architectures, a new and diverse attention to the soul-body relationship.⁴

Clearly, transformations do not occur overnight, but rather slowly, and habits and certainties of the past live together with the research and experimentation of novelties. For the study of a psycho-physical link, which we are interested in, I will argue that there are two tendencies that need to be considered: 1. A traditional physiognomy which reserves attention to fixed traits that cannot change, and continues its work of juxtaposing man and animal; 2. A new type of research on the movement of the body and its meanings; it is a type of enquiry which was then considered cutting edge, which finds it difficult to impose, because it does not offer clear, simple, and stable prejudices, it does not offer limited, reassuring stereotypes, like traditional physiognomy. It is therefore not a useful technique to understand quickly, once and for all, the traits of someone standing in front of us, clarifying if he is a good or a bad person. What would be called mimicry from the 18th century, pathognomony and later psychology, takes the changes of the environment into too much consideration, which then has resulted in a less hurried, but also less sure interpretation of the other.

As an example, I will consider the case of eyebrows, a body part which deserves special attention in the 17th century, and I will refer to three authors who testify the complexity of the baroque line of thought:

- The first one mostly represents tradition (clearly marking its limits at the same time) (Rodler 2009, 1–13); he studies the shape of eyebrows and

⁴ Some texts about visual perception in 17th-century culture are: De Armas, Frederick. A. 2005. *Ekphrasis in the Age of Cervantes*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; Caroli, Flavio. 2012. *Storia della fisiognomica. Arte e psicologia da Leonardo a Freud*. Milano: Mondadori Electa, 81–123; Gal, Ofer and Chen-Morris, Raz. 2013. *Baroque Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

the quantity of hairs, the fixed traits (or those considered to be such). His name is Giovan Battista della Porta (1535–1615), a Neapolitan magician, author of theatrical works, and scholar of physiognomy, translated and esteemed in Europe until the end of the 19th century;

- The second one applies physiognomy to poetry; he chooses and studies a hundred forms of the face, involving other writers in the composition of one hundred sonnets to illustrate his research. His name is Cornelio Ghirardelli (Bologna cca 1572–1637), a doctor and friar from Bologna who lived sometime between the 16th and the 17th century, and who is among the first scholars to establish a close relationship between physiognomic-scientific research and literature (Rodler 2012, 33–43; Vigh 2013, 5–25);
- The third one, instead, experiments with the research of novelty; he studies facial expressions and eyebrow movement (Montagu 1994; Pericolo 2005, 211–233). His name is Charles Le Brun (1619–1690), a French artist, painter in Louis XIV's court, a theoretician of passions, also esteemed throughout the whole 19th century.

I will then begin with della Porta who dedicates the second book out of the six included in *Della fisionomia dell'uomo* (a work with several Latin and Italian editions, the one dated 1610 being the last one he edited himself)⁵ to the analysis of the body, literally from head to toe. The third chapter of this book considers the eyebrows presented through a continuous reference to Aristotle, Plinius, Galeno, Polemone, Adamanzio, that is a naturalistic-philosophical-medical tradition of consolidated fame. Despite a learnedly inter-textual writing, the analysis is simple, presented along with della Porta's personal experiences; as an observer of the body, he could verify the existence of the so-called winning shapes and losing shapes, which correspond to good or bad characters:

1. The winning shapes are the ones defined as “virile,” represented as a curve in the eyebrows, a medium quantity of hairs, the distance to the nose; in terms of personality, these traits show a serious man, irascible and intelligent, similar to

⁵ For a history of the text cfr. Paoletta, Alfonso. 2012. “Introduzione.” In della Porta, Giovan Battista. *De humana phisiognomoniam*. Ed. Alfonso Paoletta, XI–LXI. Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane; the Italian text of 1610 also has a critical edition: della Porta, Giovan Battista. *Della fisionomia dell'uomo libro sei*. 2013. Ed. Alfonso Paoletta. Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane.

a lion (*Figure 1*), a tiger, a mastiff dog and an eagle. In della Porta's words, in the paragraphs *Ciglia non distese*, *Ciglia piegate vicino al naso*, *Giglia gionte* (in writing "ciglia," della Porta means eyebrows, according to what the title specifies):

Polemone et Adamanzio nella figura dell'uomo virile gli danno le ciglia non appianate ma curve [...] le ciglia piegate al naso dimostrano uomo austero et acerbo, come nel *Libro de gli Animali* lasciò scritto Aristotele, et ancor da Galeno e da Plinio nella figura dell'uomo virile. Polemone ed Adamanzio gli danno non le ciglia diritte e delicate, come alle donne, ma torte, arcuate. [...] Se li dovemo rassomigliare a gli animali, le rassomigliaremo al leone, tigre, al cane feroce detto 'mastino', aquile et altri ferocissimi animali. [...] se gli archi si toccano nel naso, dimostrano piacevole, sottile e studioso nell'opere sue. Io quanti ho veduto con queste ciglia così congiunte, e di peli non folti, tutti ho conosciuti studiosi, accurati nell'opere loro e ben costumati.⁶

2. In contrast, the shapes defined as "losing" are typical of women (misogyny has been marking centuries of physiognomic studies) (Raina 2002, 155–163), and some types of men who are quite effeminate or lecherous. These eyebrows show a straight line, with hair too thick or too thin, their position is closer to the eyes, a line going towards the temples, either going upwards or downwards. In these cases, the personality has weak traits, it is insincere (like a monkey, *Figure 2*), ignorant, dirty (like a pig), and again envious, lying, insolent. In della Porta's words in *Ciglia dritte e profilate*, *Ciglia che stanno curvate alle tempie*, *Ciglia svelte dal naso e distese alle tempie*, *Ciglia dimesse in tutto*, *Giglia congiunte e dense*:

6 della Porta, Giovan Battista. 2013. *Della fisionomia dell'uomo*, 132–133; 137: "Polemone and Adamazio give curved, not straight eyebrows to the figure of a virile man [...] curved eyebrows close to the nose show a stern and severe man, as Aristotle wrote in *The book of Animals*, and as Galeno and Plinius also wrote about the figure of a virile man. Polemone and Adamanzio do not give him straight, delicate eyebrows, like in women, but curved, arched [...] if we can compare them to animals, we would put them next to a lion, a tiger, a ferocious mastiff dog, to eagles and other very ferocious animals [...] if the arches touch on the nose, they mean a pleasant man, intelligent, attentive and considerate. I have seen men with eyebrows thus united and with not too thick hairs, and I have acknowledged them as studious, accurate in their business, and of good manners." All English translations are by Chiara Marcon.

Aristotele nel *Libro de gli animali* disse: le ciglia distese in diritto dimostrano animo molle [...] e le rassomigliarei alle ciglia delle donne [...] Le ciglia che stanno arcuate alle tempie dimostrano simulatore e che ti dà la baia; e questo lo dice Aristotele negli *Animali* [...] Questo segno io l'attribuirei alla simia, che ha le ciglia piegate in arco verso le tempie, e più di tutti gli altri animali imitano l'azioni, e par che si ridano di noi e ci diano la baia. [...] quelli a' quali vicino al naso le ciglia vanno giù, e poi s'allargano verso le tempie, sono ignoranti per assomigliarsi al porco: da Aristotele nella *Fisionomia* [...] Le ciglia, dimesse in tutto, dimostrano invidia [...] Ma quando saranno congiunte al naso e folte di peli sono di cattivissimo segno, perché dimostrano traditori monetarii, venefici, e simil vizii [...] Quanti ho veduto io uomini e vecchie che si diletano di stregherie a veneficii, e quanti ho veduto menar a morir dal boia, per lo più tutti ho visto con queste ciglia, e così ancora odo osservato da altri.⁷

Personal experience (which acts as an important experimental test in guaranteeing della Porta's success in 19th-century positivist anthropology) confirms traditional anthropology, founded on fixed traits and the medicine of moods: the tradition of Hippocrates and Galeno, still alive in the 17th century, considers a virtuous body as the one where blood, yellow bile and black bile, phlegm are balanced together, shaping mediocre forms which are beautiful because they are not marked by noticeable particularities. Considering the eyebrows, this happens when they are "scarce and measured, according to their length and shortness,

7 della Porta. *Della fisionomia dell'uomo*. 132, 135, 137: "Aristotle said in *The book of Animals*: straight eyebrows show a soft soul [...] and I would compare them to women's eyebrows [...] Arched eyebrows going towards the temples show a simulator, fooling with you [...] This is what Aristotle says in *The Animals* [...] I would attribute this sign to a monkey, who has curved, arched eyebrows towards the temples, and which more than any other animal imitates actions, and looks like it is laughing at us and making fun of us. Those whose eyebrows go downwards close to the nose and then grow larger towards the temples are ignorant, because they look like a pig: from Aristotle in the *Fisionomia* [...] eyebrow going downwards show envy [...] But when they are attached to the nose and with a lot of hairs then they are a very bad sign, because they signal traitors, forgers, poisoners, and generally deraved men [...] The ones I have seen, men and old women dealing with witchcraft and poisons, and the ones that I have seen going to die led by the hangman, mostly had this kind of eyebrows, and other people tell me that they have observed the same thing."

and big”⁸ in a coherently well-formed body. The physiognomic ideal consists of “averageness”/mediocrity (corresponding to the balance of the four moods in a well-balanced temperament): from ancient times to the whole of the 19th century, a mediocre quality represented the positive pole because it excluded marked signs, that is, excessive, in the body and in the soul. In this respect, a similarity with a lion acted as guarantee, whereas monkeys and pigs always signaled a flaw.

This research is useful in daily life for choosing friends and acquaintances, for differentiating between the good and the bad. It also represents a valuable source of historical and literary images (Mitchell 2008, 11–30): before photography, without the prejudices of physiognomy writers would not have been able to imagine and describe the face and the body of their characters. As it was hinted before, it is a generic type of knowledge which does not involve the study of any physiognomic essay. However, in some cases there is an evident collaboration as it is the case of the second author’s approach to eyebrows, that is the *Cefalogia Fisionomica*. Dated from 1630 (reprinted several times), dedicated to the study of the parts of the head (hair, forehead, eyebrows, nose, mouth, chin, ears, face, head), it was written by a little-known doctor and Franciscan friar from Bologna, Cornelio Ghirardelli, who convinced about seventy intellectuals to compose physiognomic sonnets on this subject. The main interest of this work is in the interlacement between the tradition of Aristotle and della Porta, and the novelty of the poetry of the body. The third book is dedicated to the eyebrows, described in ten shapes using della Porta’s language: “piegate vicino al naso,” “curvate alle tempie,” “inarcate,” “gionte insieme,” “congiunte,” “lunghe,” “rare di peli,” “che si piegano all’ingiu,” “distese alle tempie,” ed infine, “profilate e lunghe,” that is, thin and long, like in women. (Ghirardelli 1673, 139–193) Each description is accompanied by an engraving, a Latin motto, and a sonnet, which function almost as an emblem of the body part considered. It is an image-text where the first and the last sonnet should be read not for their literary value, but rather for the testimony they offer of a knowledge between science (physiognomy) and literary tradition (the sonnet). The chapter opens with the analysis of a man with eyebrows “curved close to the nose” which represent the virility of an austere man, rigid and irascible, with a propensity to melancholia, that is, of a cold and dry temperament. Thus, the sonnet was proposed by Raffaele Rabbia, a member of the Accademia Bolognese dei Selvaggi (Academy of the savages) who is at work

8 della Porta. *Della fisionomia dell’uomo*. 139.

on this judgment, accompanied by the motto (*Figure 3*): “Curvus erit naso ciliis, austerus, acerbis moribus, et stolidam mentem notatus homo”:⁹

Le curve ciglia a l'odorato unite
Segn'è d'austerità vana e fallace,
E di costume rigido e tenace,
Insidiatore altrui di mille vite.
Voi, ch'osate poggiate su le fiorite
Piaggie di questa età lieve, e fugace,
Torcete il guardo, e 'l passo altronde in pace
Da questi che vi segue a vie spedite.
Che non tant'ha furor tigre o pantera
Dietro a l'involator de' cari parti,
come è costui di mente audace, e fera.
Che s'ei stende la man, vuole insidiarti,
e se 'l guardo offre quella faccia austera,
fere via più che i sagittarii parti.¹⁰

Despite the language of the 17th century, enriched (but also made heavier) by inversions of the usual word order (anastrophe), by words inserted between two terms in a strong syntactic link (hyperbaton), by amplifications (hyperbole), and by antithesis, the sonnet clearly expresses the physiognomic idea: the shape of the body shows the disposition of the soul, and this evidence helps interpersonal relationships (as highlighted by the vocative in the second quatrain, probably suggestive of Petrarca), and becomes comprehensible thanks to a comparison between man and animal. Even where zoomorphism is not used, literature efficiently translates the psychophysical description of a character. Thus the sonnet on

9 Ghirardelli, Cornelio. 1673. *Cefalogia fisionomica*. Bologna: Dozza, 144: “The man with eyebrows curved close to the nose will be noticed as austere, with stern manners and of brutal mind.” The Accademia dei Selvaggi worked in Bologna between 1606 and 1629.

10 Ghirardelli. *Cefalogia fisionomica* 144: “Curved eyebrows, united at the nose / are a sign of stern soul, empty and deceiving / and of rigid and stubborn manner / which lays traps for the lives of others. / You, who tread on the flowered / path of this light and fugitive age, / direct your glance elsewhere, in peace, far / from this who rapidly follows you. / Because the wrath of a tiger or of a panther / when running after the thieves of her loved brood / is nothing to a man whose mind is audacious and ferocious. / So that if this man holds out a hand, he wants to undermine you, / and his austere face is observing you, / hurting more than arrows.”

female eyebrows accompanying the motto (*Figure 4*): “est pia quae mulier ciliis directa videtur / est animo mollis, luxuriaeque data”¹¹ signed by the pseudonym of Conforme Accademico Filopono¹² confirms what Ghirardelli explains in the text: straight and well-drawn eyebrows belong to a “soft” soul, which on a man is a sign of femininity, and on a woman expresses a “pretty languor, companion of modesty,” which can degenerate in lasciviousness, but which can also signal docility and care of domestic virtues.

Queste diritte e affilate ciglia
 De le porte degl'occhi archi pomposi;
 Questi vaghi emisferi alti e vezzosi
 Del ciel d'un volto, ove ogni cor s'appiglia.
 Quest'irigeminata, in cui la figlia
 Di Taumante i suoi fregi ha tutti ascosi;
 Queste culle d'Amore, ove i riposi
 Egli dispensa a la sua gran famiglia.
 Queste di due pupille alme e lucenti
 Diligenti custodi, onde fregiati
 ... Donna ne porta i lumi ardenti.
 Son di sguardi lascivi ami inescati
 Son di molli pensier veri argomenti.
 Son di pietà e bontà segni bramati.¹³

In the previous sonnet, the language presents several artifices: metaphors (eyebrows are arches, half spheres, rainbows, cradles), periphrases (educated and mythological, with a reference to Iris representing a rainbow), anaphors (in the

11 Ghirardelli. *Cefalogia fisionomica*. 188: “It is a woman rich in virtues the one who shows straight eyebrows and whose soul is tender and sensual.”

12 This reference is of the Academy of the Filoponici in Faenza (founded in 1612 and later changed into an Arcadia colony).

13 Ghirardelli. *Cefalogia fisionomica*, 188: “These straight, sharp eyebrows, / striking arches of the doors of the eyes; / these beautiful semispheres, high, charming / of the high part (the sky) of a face, calling to itself every heart (where every heart hangs to). / These two rainbows where Iris, daughter of Taumante, has hidden all its ornaments; / These cradles of the god Love, who gives rest to his large family (which promises a welcome to lovers) / These scrupulous keepers of two sacred, shining pupils, making... the woman's eye beautiful; / They are hooks that prompt lascivious looks / They are the subject of loving thoughts / They are signs of piety and bounty.”

last tercet), which almost deform the sonnet, the opening part being too long compared to the last three verses. Even the use of aposiopesis, that is the three points which create suspense and convey anticipation before the identification of the receiver of the sonnet, can be considered a typical trait of baroque theatricality. In this case, too, as it was before, the sonnet and the subject appear complex, yet they are simple: it is about the advice to a man who is looking for a wife to pay attention to the shape of the eyebrows and to the traits of the face of his woman (“molto deve pensar l'uomo, il quale risolve d'ammogliarsi, essend'egli bene oltre l'altre cose, il consigliarsi con qualche Fisonomico”).¹⁴ In the case of *Cefalogia*, the one hundred sonnets collected by Ghirardelli have no literary value, but they testify a shared idea and a communicative intention which proceeds *per adiectionem* (by amplification), following the taste for accumulation typical of baroque culture. Accordingly, Ghirardelli's scientific explanation, the engraving, the motto and the sonnet of his collaborator-poets, express the desire to have a grid of stereotypes to calibrate daily life: flee from those who have curved eyebrows, close to the nose, as they are similar to a tiger, and marry those who have thin, well-drawn eyebrows because they are good, beautiful women. Thus, the physiognomic idea, simplifying and schematic, helps people in getting to know each other.

Della Porta, Ghirardelli, and the authors of the sonnets are connected to a traditional idea of the body, to be interpreted by fixed traits that do not change in time. However, in the 17th century the study of the body is of interest for the philosophy of behavior. This is the third case presented at the beginning of this study (after della Porta and Ghirardelli's “team”). Charles Le Brun, who studies René Descartes's essay on the six fundamental passions of the soul (admiration, love, hate, desire, joy, sadness), and who publishes some reflections on the mobile traits of the face, and of the eyebrows in particular, writes in the *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière*, posthumously published in 1698: “le sourcil est la partie de tout le visage ou les passions se font mieux connaître” because, according to Le Brun, “à proportions que ces passions changent de nature, le mouvement du sourcil change de forms.”¹⁵ Le Brun then states that eyebrow movements reflect passions, even though involuntarily. There seem to be two basic

14 Ghirardelli. *Cefalogia fisionomica*. 189: “the man who takes a wife must reflect deeply, and among other things must ask for advice to a scholar of physiognomy.”

15 Le Brun, Charles. 1698. *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière*. Paris: Picart, 19–21: “the eyebrows are the part, of all the face, which best shows passions,” “as passions change their nature, the movement of the eyebrows change shape.”

movements which help interpretation: when the eyebrows raise in the middle, the passion expressed is pleasant; conversely, when they lower in the middle, they express a physical pain. This means that eyebrows do not lie: one can fake a smile, or can make a doe-eyed face, but eyebrows reveal the truth of the soul, independently from one's will. Therefore, they are important. They are rediscovered in the 17th century, the century which, more than any other, focuses on simulation and dissimulation, on the different forms of fiction in behavior.

To offer an example, I am going to analyze two of the passions fixed in the drawings proposed by Le Brun, and explained in relation to other parts of the face, according to a physiognomic description renewed by the study of movement: it is not morphology (the fixed shapes offered by della Porta and Ghirardelli), but a syntax of the face (in linguistic terms), expressing interiority. Considering joy (*Figure 5*), Le Brun (1698, 34–35) presents a serene forehead with well-drawn eyebrows high in the middle, smiling eyes, bright pupils, slightly open nostrils, the corner of the mouth pointing upwards, vivid colour on lips and cheeks. For wrath (*Figure 6*), Le Brun (1698, 41–42) describes a face with a wrinkled forehead, eyebrows either high or low, wrinkles between the eyes, open nostrils, closed lips, puffed, red face. In both cases Le Brun's discourse is different from della Porta's, as it establishes a relation between the expressions of mobile traits, not between forms fixed by nature.

The images thus represented are numerous, because aside from simple Cartesian passions (fear, hope, desperation, boldness, anger), there are complex passions, analyzed with great attention to the movement of the eyebrows. Thereby, surprise shows almost a caricature of raised eyebrows, eyes and mouth open wide, whereas surprise mingled with fear presents s-shaped eyebrows, a wrinkled face, a grimacing mouth. (Le Brun 1698, 24, 25)

The accuracy of Le Brun's analysis on the body in the throes of passions represents the real novelty of the psychophysical study, as Le Brun chooses to describe the movement, and not the fixed traits that belonged to the cultural heritage of traditional physiognomy. It is worth highlighting that this novelty places eyebrows at the centre of the study of expressions.

In the following centuries, regarding eyebrows, the interlacing of della Porta's and Le Brun's hypotheses (physiognomy and the anticipation of the discipline of pathognomony, as it will be named at the end of the 18th century) strengthens, even though the study and hypothesis of morphology prevails over the syntactic hypothesis. It is this trend which considers other parts of the face and of

the body as important vehicles of prejudices and stereotypes. Thus, for example, for Cesare Lombroso, the 19th century doctor who changed traditional physiognomy in anthropology, thick eyebrows usually accompany a prognathous face, big lips, black, curly hair, ultimately the typical physiognomy of black people, which is also found in monkeys and in Europeans (particularly of Southern Italy) who have not completed their evolution, being left behind. This arrested development, also signaled by thick eyebrows, is called atavism, and it characterizes several forms of devious behavior, in terms of underdeveloped, primitive, savage. (Gibson and Hahn Rafter 2006, 1–41; Rodler 2012, 1–26)

Lombroso is also a reader of Charles Darwin, 'father of the theory of evolution', but he appreciates della Porta for the way he observed personally his cases, particularly the most marked and deviant ones (as outlined when talking of the eyebrows of witches and death-row prisoners). Lombroso also deals with criminals, and he frequently describes a thief named Villella from Calabria who died in prison, in order to lay the foundation of his theory of 'born criminal'

Uomo di cute oscura, di scarsa barba, di folti sopraccigli, di muso prognato [...] con un maggior sviluppo degli archi sopraccigliari.¹⁶

In this case, the reference to eyebrows is not a syntactic one as it was in the 17th century, but it presents the morphology of a particular man, together with other facial and somatic elements. Similar features in body and behavior can be found in animals and women, among which Teresa Gambardella from Salerno (*Figure 7*), who is short, with quite dark complexion, a jutting face, and so hairy that her black hair can be confused with her eyebrows. In this context, an excerpt of the short anthropological essay, *L'uomo bianco e l'uomo di colore*, written by Lombroso in 1871, says:

Ma il fenomeno più curioso è l'impianto del capello, nero ed abbondante in tutta la regione frontale, sicché si viene a confondere con le sopracciglia, da cui si distingue soltanto per la direzione diversa impressa ai peli dal muscolo sopraccigliare.¹⁷

16 Lombroso, Cesare. 2012. *L'uomo bianco e l'uomo di colore. Letture sull'origine e la varietà delle razze umane*. Ed. Lucia Rodler. Bologna: Archetipolibri, 85: "man with dark skin, with thin beard, thick eyebrows, prognathous face [...] with a marked development of the eyebrow."

17 Lombroso. *L'uomo bianco e l'uomo di colore*. 87–88: "But the most curious phenomenon is the

It seems that in these cases, the quantity of hairs and the jut of the eyebrow create a juxtaposition of the 19th-century man with the monkey, both in body and in behaviour. Once again, a part of the body is used as a visual clue of inner identity. Traditional physiognomy, the one of fixed traits, still shapes the prejudices of late 19th-century anthropologists.

In the field of the physiognomy, there is a late approach to the movement that does not guarantee the definition of a stereotype, the primary objective of physiognomic classification. Something new appears in the 20th century, thanks to the medium of cinema which, like literature, welcomes the legacy left by physiognomy as a means to create characters, but which can more easily combine an attention on fixed traits with a focus on mobile traits. Therefore; in 1937 Snowwhite is imagined with straight, thin eyebrows in order to create the definition of an honest, tender and sensual woman, which recalls the interpretation of the sonnet of the Accademico Conforme. As for the seven dwarves, instead, it is easy to notice a marked reworking of Le Brun's passions, particularly in Happy's joy and in Grumpy's bad temper. It is therefore easy to confirm a reassuring function of physiognomy in all these cases, that is, of the representation of a standard body, defined, coherent with its personality, which allows the instant identification of a certain type of behavior.

This multisecular balance between the psychophysical consistency of an individual and its physiognomic interpretation shows irreparable creaks in the second half of the 20th century, due to a complete revolution in the idea of the body and its perception: a natural body no longer possesses anything definite and definitive from birth, it does not determine any physiognomic constriction, it does not guide to any clue to unveil its inner side. This is because, compared to the past, every individual has the opportunity to change his body in a completely unthinkable way, thanks to training, dieting, fashion, or plastic surgery. This leads to a double advantage: on the one hand, the body becomes an almost opaque object for the physiognomic eye; on the other hand, it takes on magical features because, like a character in a fairy tale, it becomes impermeable to time and space, that is, to age and weight, which can be controlled in several, more or less transformative ways.

Considering eyebrows, a pair of tweezers is enough to shape a physiognomy: it is impossible to forget Audrey Hepburn's charm in the sixties (*Figure 8*), conveyed also thanks to her eyebrows which are defined metaphorically and zoo-

hairline, black and thick at the forehead, such that they are confused with the eyebrows, from which they are differentiated only by the different direction of the hairs given by the eyebrows muscle."

morphically as seagull wings.¹⁸ That decade marks the beginning of a series of difficulties in defining the meaning of body parts in terms of morality, personality, behavior, passions, as they are the effect of a cultural participation of men and women in showing the relationship between themselves and the social context of time and of fashion above all.

The novelty of the body in the second half of the 20th century is then its transformability, which implies a new way of looking, less schematic and simplifying than with physiognomy, whose strength begins to falter in the 1960s, its “mistakes” and “conjectural” nature started to be noticed, and its findings were to be verified in social context, as outlined by Gombrich. It is this point of view that shows the importance of eyebrows: having always been the sign of a specific personality (with della Porta and Ghirardelli) or of a passion (with Le Brun) or of an ethnical development (with Lombroso), in the second half of the 20th century this body part modified according to fashion, cannot be interpreted without referring to a historical and social context. Audrey Hepburn’s eyebrow, for example, recall the “surprise” of Le Brun, with three clarifications which can be applied to all recent physiognomic conjectures: 1. That the somatic look of the second half of the 20th century is shaped artificially and therefore it does not show any spontaneous passion (seagull-wing eyebrows, for example, do not express a natural movement upwards, but a cosmetic design); 2. that the search for a correspondence between parts of the face must take into account the more or less obviously artificial nature of certain traits (in borderline cases, a face could be completely remodelled by plastic surgery, therefore being physiognomically void); 3. That every psychosomatic interpretation must be specified in terms of current fashion, the person’s gender, their profession, that is, whatever constitutes a social perception of the body.

This means that the schematic, simplifying, reassuring function of physiognomy which, like pathognomony, has studied and exploited passions, is decreasing, or – more exactly – it must be integrated with observations of a cultural and anthropological-social nature. A difficult challenge, but undoubtedly a fascinating one.

Translated by Chiara Marcon

18 The zoomorphic reference is a metaphor, not a comparison with the same body part in different species as in zoomorphic physiognomy, since eyebrows are defined by the shape of the wings.

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