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Optics Is Ethics
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PRESS RELEASE

„Then saw you not his face?”
“Oh yes my Lord. He wore his beaver¹ up.”
Hamlet, Act 1 – Scene 2

An open face is not always a true face. It can also wear a mask or have a closed visor.

The face is one of the most complicated landscapes to photograph. It is the surface on which the present can be diagnosed. For bodies are political bodies, they are parts of society and they reflect society. Each face has an individual story written all over it that unfolds in contemplation.

When a face presents itself, it virtually calls for violence to be done to it. This is how the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1905-1995) understands it in his work *Ethics and Infinity*. Lévinas, the gentle humanist, adds: "In the face of the other there is always present a presentiment of his death, and therefore, in a certain sense, also the incitement to murder." Emmanuel Lévinas escaped the Holocaust, to which his family had fallen victim. His biography was marked by the experience of radical evil, which he considers a primordial human tendency.

Yet this face that challenges to murder also carries a fragility that evokes benevolence. Every confrontation with the countenance of another challenges and disturbs my egoistic calm. The countenance disarms through its exposure, but at the same time it reveals the fundamental unattainability of the other. I will never be able to be him or her, can never see the world through the eyes of this other.

This fundamental inaccessibility of the other underlines the presence of the infinite in the finite as well as the divine in the human. To do violence to the face of the other is thus an attempt to control that which is inaccessible to me by completely dominating or even erasing it. More than a physical reality, the face embodies a metaphysical concept that gives a meaning to otherness that runs counter to any reduction of the other to a thing.

The nakedness of the human face is a call to respect—to fundamental respect for its irredeemable otherness.

Stefanie Peter

¹ The lower part of the helmet, fixed to the neck-armour to protect the face and cheeks; properly it moved upwards, as the visor moved down, but the word is sometimes used to include the visor.