

## Comment on the Papers by Hester Bell Jordan and Mark Vareschi

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Mark Vareschi's rich paper draws a connection between Lavaterian physiognomy and the biometric thought that forms the basis of contemporary technologies of surveillance. He argues that "contemporary facial recognition technologies rest upon three key eighteenth-century formations:

- 1) Anti-Black empiricist aesthetics, as seen in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*
- 2) A heuristic for the visual that relies on abstraction, as seen in William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*
- 3) A reductionist and algorithmic understanding of the human face, as in Johan Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*.

Hogarth's heuristic, is, so to speak, purely formal, and ultimately rejects the connection of facial features with permanent character (as opposed to fleeting emotions). Lavater, on the other hand, as Vareschi puts it "develops an algorithmic and reductionist mode of approaching the human face to analyze its character."

Hester Bell Jordan traces "the material culture of... 'Beethoven science'" through a particular genealogy of Beethoven's 1812 life mask, made by Franz Klein, the assistant of phrenology founder, Franz Joseph Gall. I found the historical connection with the Streichers and their portrait gallery surprising and fascinating, as well as the connection to the rhetoric of genius we were discussing just before lunch.

But I would like to bring into the conversation Hegel's commentary on physiognomy and phrenology from his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). For Hegel physiognomy and phrenology form a last stage in observational reason's attempt to unify self-consciousness and the material world, the inner and the outer, a misguided dead end that through its sheer grotesque absurdity demands its own reversal – away from limiting representational thought that regards spirit as a thing – in this case, a skull bone – and brings about the "infinite judgment" of Hegel's own philosophy of spirit.

I offer a few quotes from Hegel, an attempt to summarize his 20+ page diatribe against physiognomy and phrenology:

- 1) "Lichtenberg is thus right in saying: *Supposing the physiognomist did once take the measure of a man; it would only be a matter of decent resolve on the man's part to make himself again incomprehensible for centuries.*"
- 2) "Lichtenberg... adds this remark: "If someone said, 'To be sure, you act like an honest man, but I can see from your face that you are forcing yourself to do so and are a knave at heart,' then any upright fellow, when addressed in that fashion, will, until the end of time, respond with a slap in the accuser's face." – This retort is for that reason *exactly to the point*, because it is the refutation of the first presupposition of such a science of what people mean, namely, that *the actuality* of a person is supposed to be his face, etc. – The *true being* of a person is rather *his deed*.

I'd like to point out that Lichtenberg was a Hogarth enthusiast, as demonstrated by his close commentaries on Hogarth's print series published in the Göttinger Taschenkalender between 1784 and 1796, and this rejection of physiognomy is fully of a piece with his readings of the English satirist. (Indeed, Hogarth was a crucial model for the development of democratic thought in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany, as can also be seen in Schiller's use of one of the prints from *The Analysis of Beauty* in his *Kallias Letters* of 1793, and, in a more veiled manner, in *his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* of the following year.)

I offer a few more quotations from Hegel:

- 1) experience ... surely teaches that just as one sees with the eye as the organ of sight, then it is *not* with the skull that we commit murder, steal, write poetry, etc. – ... just as the brain is the living head, the skull is the *caput mortuum*.

I should point out that this is Hegel's pun. *Caput mortuum*, which means death's head, and which we could relate to the pirate flag, was also an expression used in alchemy to designate the inert remainder of a chemical reaction. It is precisely that which, being lifeless, cannot carry Spirit further in its development.

- 2) In this dead being, the spiritual movements and determinate modes of the brain would have to give themselves their own display of their external actuality, an actuality which is nonetheless still in the individual himself.
- 3) The *actuality and existence of man is his skull-bone*.
- 4) what in truth the foregoing has been saying may be expressed in this way: The *being of spirit is a bone*.
- 5) The skull-bone is not an organ of activity, nor is it even a speaking movement. Neither theft, nor murder, etc., is committed by the skullbone, nor does it even in the least make a change in countenance such that it would thereby become a verbal gesture... In the presence of a skull, one can surely think of many things, just like Hamlet does with Yorick's, but the skull-bone for itself is such an indifferent, unencumbered thing that there is nothing else immediately to be seen in it nor to think about; there is just it itself.
- 6) On one side stands a whole set of motionless locations on the skull, and on the other side stands a whole set of spiritual properties whose plurality and whose determination will depend on the state of psychology... If each of the children of Israel, who were compared to the sand on the seashore, took for himself the grain of sand which was supposed to be a sign of him, still the indifference and arbitrariness by which each would be allotted his very own grain of sand would be just as great as the indifference and arbitrariness which allocates to a place on the skull and to the form of the bones every capacity of the soul and every passion. .... for observation *this* determinateness of spirit is also indifferent in relation to *this* determinate being of the skull. This is so because of the two objects of this observing, the one is a desiccated *being-for-itself*, an ossified property of spirit, just as the other is a desiccated *being-in-itself*. Such an ossified thing, as both are, is completely indifferent to everything else. It is just as much a matter of indifference to the high bump itself whether a murderer is in its vicinity as it is to the murderer whether its flatness is close by him.
- 7) ... the individual can be something other than what he internally originally is and even more than what he is *as a bone*.

- 8) it is to be regarded as a complete denial of reason to offer a bone as the *actual existence* of consciousness ... Therefore, if a person is told, “You, your inner, are constituted in this way *because* your bones are constituted in such and such a way,” this means nothing more than that I regard a *bone* as *your actuality*. To reply to such a judgment with a box on the ear, as mentioned in the case of physiognomy [would not be enough] – The retort here would really have to go as far as beating in the skull of anyone making such a judgment in order to demonstrate to him in a manner as palpable as his wisdom that for a person a bone is nothing in itself, much less *his* true actuality.
- 9) [Therefore] Without hesitation, the raw instinct of self-conscious reason will reject such a science of phrenology ... Thus it is that this final stage of Reason in its observational role is its worst; and that is why its reversal becomes a necessity.

Both Mark and Hester address the implicit or explicit racism of Lavater’s and Gall’s theories. From this point of view, Hegel’s critique of anatomical determinism can be read as an early refutation of such notions, or at least of the conceptual groundwork on which they stand. On the other hand, Hegel’s emphasis on the infinite potential of the human spirit, when liberated from such determinism, can also be seen to underlie, or at least to be equivalent to, the rhetoric of genius which informs the reception of Beethoven from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to our own time. One larger question for both of you and a couple more specific ones for each of you.

How does relating contemporary practices such as biometric surveillance or DNA analysis to historically discredited pseudo-scientific theories such as physiognomy or phrenology help bring into question those practices – or, more practically, how can we strategically position such historical analysis to have an effect beyond academic workshops, or academia in general? What is the relation of such discredited pseudo-sciences to biologically deterministic discourses that still have currency in contemporary academia, such as neuro and cognitive science, which often can be used to discard the results of cultural or historical analysis?

As for individual questions – Mark, I wonder if it would be worth investigating the continuous practice of the lineal abstraction of the face in the practice of art teaching since Hogarth, or even before him. Heads and bodies had been reduced to simple geometrical forms as early as in the work of Luca Cambiaso, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the reduction of the face into prismatic facets meeting at specific edges and apexes – which provide precisely the loci for biometric data as seen in your figure 2 – has been common in art education for probably the last century or more. Another avenue of investigation I might suggest is the relationship of Lavater’s profiles to Neoclassical painting, in which – due to the influence of classical reliefs – the profile is the most common body configuration.

My questions for Hester will of necessity be in a more amateur mode, but I would love to bring into your analysis his actual music. I wonder to what extent what we might call the phrenological rhetoric of Beethoven’s genius matches with the lionization of his middle, heroic period, and what challenges to this view are posed by his more difficult late period? I am referring to the fact that a view of “genius” necessitates the public’s assent, which may be harder to obtain with more challenging, introverted works such as his late quartets or sonatas. No cinematic equivalent of *Amadeus* has been created for Beethoven. *Immortal Beloved* probably came closest, but it attained nothing like the critical or popular success of *Amadeus*. One can imagine a film – by analogy with *Amadeus*, let’s call it *Van* – successfully using the Fifth, the Moonlight sonata – or, to go to the extroverted part of his late career, the Ninth, to gain the public’s assent. Could something equivalent be done with the *Grosse Fuge* or Op. 111? *A Late*

*Quartet*, if you have seen it, attempted it with the c-sharp minor, Op. 131, but while lip service was paid throughout, in the dialogue, to the transcendent genius of the composition, I don't think the film reached a large enough audience to achieve its goal.