

## The Visionary Drawing: Portraits and Faces (Strasbourg, 19–20 Oct 23)

Université de Strasbourg, Oct 19–20, 2023

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The Visionary Drawing and its Knowledge: Portraits and Faces.

Workshop organised as part of the research programme "The visionary drawing and its knowledge. From the study and valorization of the archives of Théophile Bra" (University of Strasbourg Institute of Advanced Studies – USIAS).

The workshop is addressed to:

- PhD candidates or postdocs
- confirmed researchers
- professors

Draw without any particular intention, scribble automatically, and faces will almost always appear on the paper. Leading an excessive facial life, one is also in a perpetual fever of faces. (Henri Michaux, "En pensant au phénomène de la peinture", in Michaux 2001, p. 320.)

The workshop suggests to reflect on the transformations of the portrait and on the representation of the face in the visionary drawing of the 19th and 20th century. Associated with the research programme on the written and drawn archives of Théophile Bra (1797-1863) and supported by the USIAS, it aspires to open up the approach to the visionary drawing in order to comprehend its participation in epistemological and philosophical changes of modern times. It seeks to renew the methods of art history by including the history of science and of knowledge about the psyche, medicine and philosophy, which will encourage – beyond the definition of a visual culture – a reflection on the creativity they have in common in terms of images and graphic processes.

The portrait is at the heart of the founding myth of the invention of the drawing, as told by Pliny the Elder in the story of Dibutade who drew a line around the shadow of her beloved's face in order to preserve its memory. Here, the drawing of the face creates a tension between the existence of a model about to disappear and the "effect of presence" of the subject of the image (Marin 1981, p. 9), memory and resemblance. The latter, however, in these early days of portraiture, is a matter of "contact" between shadow and line, functioning like an imprint, rather than a matter of imitation of the visible having formed the cornerstone of the scheme that would dominate Western mimesis (Didi-Huberman 2008). Classical art theorists would thus locate the portrait on a ridge between the recognition of the portrayed and the idealisation, between the particular and the general, the individual and the type (Pommier 1998) or between "the face of the body

and the social or institutional face" (Goldberg 2010).

In the 19th century, the portrait became more accessible (Halliday 2000) and the individuality that it showed emphasised the expression of interiority although it was at the same time threatened by the seriality of mechanical reproductions. The questioning of classical idealism and the arrival of photography (Font-Réaulx 2012, Wicky 2017) and film (Aumont 1992) did not lead, however, to the rejection of the portrait as a simple reproduction of an individual's physical features. On the one hand, the traditions of icon and allegory did not disappear from the modern portrait. On the other hand, the period described as the "century of identities" saw new codes seeking to "fix, classify, organise and hierarchise" them (Fureix/Jarrige 2015). The role of Johann Kaspar Lavater's physiognomy, whose works were widely translated around 1800, has been noticeable during a long time in the arts and in literature, based as it was on a norm derived from the classical theory of art giving way to research on difference and deviance (Guéron 2011 and 2015). Following this "pseudo-science" (Dumont 1984), phrenology, anthropometry (Baridon/Guéron 1999, Renneville 2000, Baridon 2003, Piazza/Ceyhan 2011, Stiénon/Wicky 2013), figurations of hysteria and madness (Didi-Huberman 1982, Aboudrar 1999) – relayed today through morphopsychology and facial recognition that began in the 1960's (Meyer 2019) – have had a lasting impact on portrait drawing because they make themselves use of a graphic method where, from facial features to expressions, the ideal of a transparency of the visible, of a visual grammar and of a semiotic decoding (Le Breton 2003) is dominant.

At the end of the 19th century, the evolution of psychiatry and the arrival of Freudian psychoanalysis replaced the analogical method of physiognomy with a causal relation between the psyche and its symptoms, but it continued to place the clue at the root of its interpretation (Ginzburg 1980). Similarly, even if the transition from the 19th to the 20th century saw a proliferation of research questioning the limits of medical materialism as well as the limitation of the psyche to interiority in order to consider new forms of expansion of mind and thought, they were still expressed for a long time in a visual manner, for example in the representation of auras and radiances, the multiplication and dissolution of outlines, or even the effects of transparent faces (Rousseau 2015). Finally, the 20th century is often interpreted as a period of crisis of the subject and of conventions of description and of mastering the "faciality" (von Matt 1983, Deleuze/Guattari 1980), that are sometimes expressed visually through "disfiguration" (Grossman 2004), chaos or the silent mask (Paris 1992).

How does the Western visionary drawing of the 19th and 20th century approach, participate in or distinguish itself from this context? Which of its iconographical and artistic inventions renew the tradition of portraiture?

There has been a great amount of resistance to the normalisation and decoding of the psyche since the beginning of the 19th century and until the anti-psychiatry movement from the 1950's to the 1970's. It is expressed in the visual arts through a tendency to blur identities, from dandyism to disguise, through situations of tension between the signifying figure and the opacity of the face, the subjectivity and the mask, the reference to established codes and the acceptance of the imaginary (Courtine/Haroche 1994, Belting 2017). However, from the beginning of the 19th century onwards, many artists are themselves the target of medical studies focussing on the phenomena of vision and hallucination (Dubois/Gentil 2015, Cheminaud 2018, Jubinville 2020), as well as

the subject of self-observations that reinvent the alienist paradigm of the penetrating and scrutinising eye. The assumed proximity between genius and madness contributes to this (Becker 1978, Gros 1997). Do the portraits and faces drawn by visionary artists reveal any traces of such practices?

Let us clarify that any artwork displaying a premonition of the future can be called visionary (Didi-Huberman 2021). Moreover, as Jacques Derrida writes, "even if the drawing is mimetic, as we say, reproductive, figurative, representative, even if the model is actually in front of the artist, the line must proceed in the night. It escapes the field of sight" (Derrida 1990, p. 50). However, the workshop suggests instead to question the ways in which portraits and drawn faces evoke an Other or an Elsewhere of the visible that invades the phenomenal world (Henry 1988), whether the invisible underlies it, opposes it or is intertwined with it. We thus wish to follow Jean-François Chevrier's reflections on L'hallucination artistique (Chevrier 2015) by suggesting to define temporarily the visionary drawing as an "experience and a poetic process" (ibid., p. 445, emphasis in original) conveying a capacity "to see beyond actual appearances", whether it leads to a proliferation of details or to the dissolution and erasure of the figure (ibid., p. 253). The term "visionary drawing", rather than hallucinatory, is intended to preserve the double movement that marked the work of Théophile Bra: that of a resistance to secularisation, to the scientific reduction of the ontological Being to the visible or to an objectification of the invisible which links him to the mystical tradition (Certeau 1982, Pires-Marques 2010); and that of a desire to see the invisible, haunted by a search for truth expressed in processes of visualisation and transmission of the invisible shared with other fields of knowledge. A number of moments of crisis mark this period, such as those frequently identified by the art history of Romanticism, Symbolism, Surrealism or even the Beat Generation and Psychedelism. Following William Blake's Visionary Heads, Bra's numerous drawn portraits display anachronisms and are similar to those of Carl Fredrik Hill, Alfred Kubin, Mikhail Vrubel, Joan Miró, André Masson and Antonin Artaud. Although little known in the 19th and 20th centuries, since they were not exhibited until the end of the 1990s (Houston 1997, Paris 2007), their configurations are reminiscent of the way in which clairvoyance is expressed, for example by Odilon Redon, Edvard Munch, Marguerite Burnat-Provins, Giorgio de Chirico, Jack Kerouac and Jay DeFeo. Not only did Surrealism rediscover Romanticism, as the Beat Generation would later on, especially Blake, but in these movements hallucinatory and visionary faces multiplied, seeming, as in Bra's time, to link knowledge of the psyche to the artistic creation.

Several research perspectives can already be suggested. Without being restrictive, they allow to test the characteristics of Théophile Bra's practice of portrait drawing over a long period of time.

- Visionary portraits, portraits of visionaries. One could examine the ways in which the representational frameworks of mystical vision, rapture and hallucination developed by the clinical gaze from the 19th century onwards (Foucault 1963) are shared by artists, whether it is a question of endorsing or resisting them, or of emancipating themselves from them by developing a critical dimension of the drawing practice.

- Self-portraits and doubles. We know about the difficulty to define self-portraiture, since every portrait is a subtle alliance between identity and otherness (Lascaux/Ouallet 2014). How do artists play with this when they show their self, permitted by the tradition of self-portraiture and the representation of their own face? One could especially look into the double. The latter underwent an

evolution from literary romanticism to medical diagnosis, notably through the problem of multiple personalities (Carroy 1993) and schizophrenic psychosis, but did artists agree with it or oppose it?

- Imaginary genealogies. The creation of visionary genealogies through portraiture contributes to the creation of historical echoes or temporal anachronisms which testify to the experience that gives rise to and invents them. Genealogical reconstruction has an identity component, which is often based on an instrumentalisation of memory rather than on a scientific approach (Ragon 2007). It can also be motivated by a renewal of kinship relations, the tradition of artistic filiation (Maillet 2011) or legendary ancestral lineages. In addition to examining these processes, the shared or distinct treatment of genealogies by artists, alienists and psychiatrists will allow us to address the barely explored tendency to a "retrospective medicine" (James 1997) identifying the historical background of the visionary experience in visual terms.

- Vision and staring games. Portrait faces frequently seem to respond to the gaze of the observer. Since the Renaissance, "the subject of the autonomous portrait (...) needs a counterpart for its realisation, the independent viewer who is addressed" (Boehm 1985). The portrait thus establishes a relationship and its "semantic efficiency" has long consisted of a form of sociability (Wrona 2012, p. 26 and p. 31). But the visionary drawing gives the gaze a meaning that goes beyond the problem of the face to face. "The face, writes Jean-Luc Nancy, shows the vision remaining invisible in it in the strict sense because the eye is not 'itself' the vision" (Nancy 2014, p. 34). The eye can thus at turns become opaque or transparent, be directed towards the viewer of the drawing, towards visible motifs or a point beyond the image. How do these staring games relate to the economy of the page, to its blank spaces, to the framing of the figure, to non-figurative forms or to writings that potentially surround the figures, as is the case with Théophile Bra?

Selection Committee (to be confirmed)

Laurent Baridon, professor of contemporary art history, University Lumière - Lyon 2.

David Le Breton, professor of sociology and anthropology, University of Strasbourg.

Boris Roman Gibhardt, curator of the collections and literary studies of the Goethe-Nationalmuseum, Klassik-Stiftung Weimar.

Julie Ramos, professor of art history, University of Strasbourg and Fellow of USIAS.

Érika Wicky, European University Institute and associated researcher of LARHRA, University Lumière - Lyon 2.

More details

Paper proposals consisting of a title, a presentation of no more than 2,500 characters including spaces and a biographical note of approximately 1,000 characters including spaces are to be sent before the 22nd of March 2023 to: [dessin.visionnaire.usias@gmail.com](mailto:dessin.visionnaire.usias@gmail.com)

Languages: English, French

This workshop is part of a series of scientific events as part of the research programme "The visionary drawing and its knowledge."

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