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- 1 In this work, Hans Belting sets out to substantiate the assumption that the possibility and development of the image of the face have been tied to the concept of mask from time immemorial up to the very now of the “consumption of media faces” as the author puts it. The enterprise appears awe-inspiring, despite the charm of the oppositional pair face/mask only reminiscent of the once sturdy structuralism. The book falls into three parts, each of them divided in sundry usually short chapters. The first deals theoretically and factually with the face/mask relation (“Face and Mask: Changing Views”, p. 17-90), while the third is a rather inchoate criticism of the commodification of face in general and in the cyberspace of “Internet culture” in particular—from this angle are viewed artists as different as Andy Warhol and Arnulf Rainer among others (“Media and Masks: The Production of Faces”, p. 175-246). The second part, dedicated to portraiture and ranging from Jan Van Eyck to Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon and photographer Jorge Molder through Antonello da Messina, Albrecht Dürer, Caravaggio, Annibale Carracci, Nicolas Poussin and Rembrandt, constitutes beyond doubt the centerpiece of the book (“Portrait and Mask: The Face as Representation”, p. 91-174). My review brings to bear on this second part, which includes the thesis proposed elsewhere by the author that realism is strictly of Flemish birth due to the happy coincidence that the painters who inaugurated it have first depicted frontal more or less flat Veronica-like versions of Christ’s face. It was the consideration of this image as the “true image” (the author calls it an “Ur-image”) that enabled them, under the conception of an individual document as was the case with Christ’s face, to create the ‘portrait’ as likeness.
- 2 Now, much as we would like to approve of the author’s desire for smooth transitions, to hold such a theory one, quite apart from discounting the lack of a neat sequence in the works of the Flemish masters and especially Jan Van Eyck, has to wipe all previous and contemporaneous European developments in painting, sculpture, and illumination off. As a matter of fact Hans Belting often appears to carry an extended interpretive license

entailing the substitution of evaluative descriptions for documentation of social and cultural theories. Here is one instance. Convinced that Jan Van Eyck is the maker of space and time, Belting gives the following account of this original creation: "Picture frames were originally constructed like real window frames. Within such a frame, the portrait occupied a kind of intersection point between the painted and the real world through which a viewer communicated with the person in the picture. The frame also functioned as a time window by separating the time in the picture from the time that preceded it. Thus, it logically separates the time of memory from the viewer's time" (p. 127).

- 3 As I will presently try to explain, I cannot bring myself to agree with Hans Belting with regard to the soundness neither of the inference drawn ("logically") nor of the whole quote. "Frame" and "intersection" (a term of geometrical perspective, used almost in the original meaning but within a specious context) are enlisted to distinguish in the painting the background from the figure. At the same time, since the author is under compulsion to make the "communication" between the figure painted and the viewer both present and exclusive, the "frame" must also "separate" (which means here "severe", "cancel") the time of the occurrence of the self-portrait from the past so as to drive the viewer's time awareness out and thus his possibility of comparison; the reason for all these *ad hoc* contraptions being just to turn a blind eye to the psychological and cultural complexity of the process of recognition. In addition to fantastic interpretations, the text shows also perplexing shifts of meaning the most worrying being those concerning "mask" and "face". Not infrequently where a statement is about the "face", we encounter a "mask" and *vice-versa*, which is not to blame on the translators who followed the German text closely, sometimes perhaps too closely. The topic of face/mask on the whole seems best fitting to Modernism and Postmodernism (Belting did place some representative instances here and there) pervaded as they are by staging, photography and motion-picture, on condition that it is envisaged within a wide horizon of historical circumstances and, at the same time, of specific states of affairs in which judgments and linguistic activity in general are at least as much significant as images. This would mean that there is not just one modernism and the different modernisms may not be just variants of the main or main ones.
- 4 In his inconclusive but lively book on historical methodology, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), Michel Foucault did all he could to muster various "discourses". He did not only reject the beloved "One" discourse of ideological reduction, but he went so far as to deny the self-identity of the historian. This gesture of self-effacement, however, was meant as an impassioned praise of history, of social history. I do not know whether Hans Belting in relation to his topic would reckon Michel Foucault among the missing subjects. My impression is that perhaps something like historical passion is what he is longing for too. To this direction it may be seen to point some features of the text as a streak of Heideggerian morbidity, a lurking fear of loss if I am not mistaken, and even the often shown through didactic ambience. To conclude, I am quite certain that the keen-minded reader will seldom be disappointed in probing Belting's text alone.