

Cornelia Klecker and Gudrun Grabher

The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television

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As an introduction to a theme as complex and puzzling as the human face and its disfigurement the authors of *The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television* Cornelia Klecker and Gudrun Grabher select poetry by Kenneth Sherman from the volume *Words for Elephant Man*. The face and personal story of the infamous Elephant Man take shape as an emblem and symbol of body disfigurement, which became a sort of spectacle of deformity. Through Kenneth Sherman's poetry the popular story of a miserable freak stands out. The face of the well-known elephant man, a face "malformed and guileless", introduces the theme of the book, a theme which is one of the most relevant anthropological and cultural topics across centuries and cultures. As a part of the body, the fully visible face represents an essential component of social identity, calling for cultural meanings. The face is a familiar and universal element which enables self-knowledge and encounters with otherness. The ability to express emotions, feelings and thoughts through facial mimicry is unique to human interaction and communication. Therefore, the face represents the center of a dialectical relationship between the gaze of the human being and the community. Singular and ordinary, the face receives both the gaze of the individual on itself and the one of others, thus the gaze turns the face into an object. As

social *topos*, a visual figure and literary motif, the human face has been analyzed also as a space and a scene of facial disfigurement. Facial appearance and its deformity have been associated with moral character, often with a negative connotation. Above all facial disfigurement has been interpreted as a result of a monstrous condition, corrupted identity, or an evil sign. The aim of *The Disfigured Face* is to precisely identify and define the different forms of facial disfigurement and its role, use and abuse in literature, cinema, and arts. The book is much more than a collection of essays about the occurrences of a theme through media, it is rather a fascinating example of a thorough examination of a prismatic issue and its sprawling proliferation. *The Disfigured Face* is divided into two parts which offer different critical views of the fictional representations of facial disfigurement. In the first section, the authors look over the disfigured face in American literature, while the second one discusses the characterization of defacement in American film and television. Referencing a vast array of sources, all the chapters draw on a complete "exposure" of both traditional connotation and contemporary discourses of the subject. This fascinating book presents the first cultural and historical understanding of facial disfigurement, questioning stereotypical tropes, negative implications, and prejudiced simplifications.

The book opens with an introduction by Klecker and Gudrum, followed by an indispensable preface by Gerhard Pierer, who investigates the use of facial plastic surgery. Pierer starts with a quotation by Gaspare Tagliacozzi (a pioneer of reconstructive surgery) that analyzes and discusses the cultural and social beliefs about this medical practice. Pierer retraces the principal historical practices recognizing in the “tremendous impact of the second world war” a dramatic turn which caused the improvement of the surgical techniques. The chapter ends with a crucial exploration of the conflict between the repairing intervention and the cosmetic one. Pierer connects a brief outlook into the future of facial plastic surgery, highlighting the significance of it in the contemporary age. The first part of the book presents a relevant selection of the presence of the theme in American literature. Sharrona Pearl looks over two popular and feminist novels: *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* by Fay Weldon, and *Flavor of the Month* by Olivia Goldsmith. The women protagonists of these two stories undergo painful and hazardous surgeries to converge on an idealistic and perfect body. Pearl discusses the traditional notion of ugliness and beauty, putting them into a dialectical relationship. Eventually the author suggests a comparison between the makeover of these protagonists and the one realized in the television show *The Swan*. The following chapters by Hayley Mitchell Haugen and Sandra Tausel deal with fictional and malformed characters and their relationship with the other. Haugen applies the model identifying disability as “narrative prosthesis” to James Hankins’s novel *Drawn*; while Tausel explores the case of *Wonder*, a children’s novel based on the story of a ten-year boy born with a facial deformity (Mandibulofacial Dysostosis or Treacher Collins Syndrome). Both these chapters negotiate “otherness”, emphasizing the contribution of these case studies to the accurate diversification of fictional discourses on facial disfigurement.

The closing chapter of the book’s first part is a tribute to Elephant Man, through the analysis of poet Kenneth Sherman’s volume *Words for Elephant*

Man. Gudrun Grabher resumes Sherman’s words, written on behalf of Elephant man, who represents a sort of *fil rouge* in the book, connecting the two parts of it. Indeed, the story of “the ugliest man in the world” inspires both David Lynch’s movie (*The Elephant Man*, 1980) and Bernard Pomerance’s play (*The Elephant Man*, 1979), which are examined in the chapter *Loving the monster* by Suzannah Biernoff. Following Brian Rosenberg’s paradigm about freak’s representations in contemporary cinema, Biernoff illustrates how Elephant man’s face acts as a mirror of society.

Male disfigured heroes and villains are the protagonists of the chapter by Fran Pheasant-Kelly and the one by Julia Moseneder. In the first case, Pheasant-Kelly remarks on the negative connotations associated with characters who are facially compromised compared to James Bond’s positive masculinity in Craig-era movies. Moseneder reviews types of facial disfigurement in a collection of contemporary television series. In *American Horror Story* (2011-), *Hannibal* (2013-2015), *24* (2001-2010), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), among others, violent accidents or congenital defects provoke scars, damages, mutilations, or defacements. Distinguishing between heroic and villainous characters, Moseneder attempts to identify the negative or positive connotations of facial and body disfigurement. Closely related to the previous chapter, the last chapter offers a close reading of the medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005), analyzing it in the framework of media representation. The author, Cornelia Klecker, shows how the tv-series avoid easy stereotypes about facial disfigurement connotations, presenting genuine stories and characters.

The Disfigured Face in American Literature, Film, and Television is a significant book which expands and improves the debate around a crucial theme and its representations through contemporary media.

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