

# The Physiognomy of Grimacing in France at the Beginning of the Age of Enlightenment

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(Translated from French by Dave Ames Curtis)

Each of you knows perfectly well that, among the pieces of advice physiognomists and artists or art theorists give to their readers, there is at least one they all share: to observe one's own face in a mirror. Now, the issue I would like to raise during this talk is situated in a particular context, one in which one's own reflection has never so keenly been scrutinized (as the history of the use of mirrors confirms) but above all one in which one has perhaps never so thoroughly played at the little game of making faces in the mirror, as is confirmed by certain writings of the time as well as by some exemplary works of art, like the grimacing self-portraits that were on the rise during this period. That said, my intention here is not to comment on the works in question or to analyze late eighteenth-century Parisians' fascination with the spectacle of those who were called at the time *grimacers*. I note simply that, at this date, the term designated a type of popular street artist mentioned in several sources. These sources speak, quite particularly, of the acting of Italian pantomimes, whose performances those artists would sometimes endeavor to illustrate in popular prints. To be brief, what I have been keen to emphasize as a prelude to this talk is that the question I am going to address — namely, that of how grimacing is among the ways in which the body creates lapses and lies — took on a new dimension at the very moment when the intentional and calculated expression of facial movements became the object of all kinds of observations.

I would like to set up my talk by starting with an article drawn from the *Dictionnaire des Beaux-Arts* of the *Encyclopédie Méthodique*, a two-volume work published between 1788 and 1791 that was initiated by the Academician Claude-Henri Watelet and completed after his death by a friend of Diderot, Pierre-Charles Lévesque. This article, signed by Watelet himself, attempts to define the notion of “grimacing” and to legitimate the employment of this term in the language of the Fine Arts. When he worked on this dictionary which was intended to be part of the great publishing enterprise of Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, Watelet was not just starting out; he had already penned several articles devoted to the Fine Arts for Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, and, in particular, a contribution to the entry on “grimacing”. Moreover, the entry he inserted in his *Dictionnaire* takes up again several points from the earlier article in the *Encyclopédie* while also developing new ones that defended an idea that was dear to him, namely that the level of moderation in the expression of the passions is the sign of a society's degree of civilization.

In reading his reflections on this question, one quickly comes to understand that, for Watelet, grimacing is not to be limited to the aesthetic field alone. On the contrary, it relates back to discussions that were already well underway before the period of the French Revolution, though those discussions are ones that were soon to take a more political and polemical turn. Here are the terms in which Watelet starts out his article: “I deem it too important for art's interest in recommending simplicity of expression and of character in imitations of nature not to seize the occasion and insist on this precept here, on the occasion of a word one will have all the more right to employ in the language of the arts as they stray further away from true perfection”.

Thus, from the outset Watelet takes up the traditional view that grimacing is tied up with the problem of the expression of the passions. But he does so while also establishing rather interesting connections between exaggerated forms of mimicry that would be the work of bad artists and those, quite real, that are those of the men and women of his time: “You artists who would like to please and affect people, be convinced that painting faces that *grimace* in order that they might seem to have character and graces or might show some expression is as repellent in the eyes of viewers as men who appear deceitful and lying, just through an exaggeration of feelings, are odious to frank and honest souls. Will you tell me that most of the expressions you want to study in society are either feigned or exaggerated, that almost everything that is called there grace and often sensibility is affection and *grimacing*? These commonplaces are unfortunately all too true: moreover, they are, it must be agreed, obstacles to the progress of your arts. You must know them and, without wasting your time complaining about them, make efforts to overcome them”.

The fact that Watelet remonstrates here against pretenses, conventions, and social hypocrisy has, of course, nothing original about it at that date. What seems more interesting is that he would do so within the context of a dictionary devoted specifically to the Fine Arts — and that he would broach the theme of the deceitfulness of appearances as an aesthetic problem.

Indeed, if one takes a quick look back at the sources for a theoretical discourse on the arts in France — namely, to the last third of the seventeenth century — what one may note is that there was no entry on “grimacing” in the first dictionaries devoted exclusively to the Fine Arts. Of course, the word was not totally absent therefrom. But it appeared only at the margins, for instance when one referred to embellishments made through “fantasy” or “caprice”. If one now takes up the standpoint of the grammarians and linguists — for example, that of Gilles Ménage in his much-talked-about *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue Française* — it is worth noting that this term already was connected with the language of painters and that at that time it meant “extravagant postures”. Whatever the case may be, it really was in the course of the eighteenth century that grimacing was going to take on increased importance in theoretical discourses on the arts, whether one was talking about painting, or, rather logically, theater: in one case as in the other, this term was employed to disqualify feigned physiognomies, those of characters represented by artists or played by actors when, with the intention of making a character seem energetic, those artists exaggerated expressions and ended up only with overdone and artificial forms of mimicry.

This observation is based on a principle that is at once highly simple and quite essential when it touches on the theory of *ut pictura poesis*: this is the principle according to which there is no passion of the soul that would not be, at the same time, a passion of the body. That, indeed, is what Jean-Baptiste Dubos underscored in 1719 in his much-talked-about *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting, and Music*. He did so in a passage where, as might be expected, he connected the problem of grimacing to the readability of the expressions of characters whom painters represent and actors play. Now, as one knows, this imperative of clarity and transparency, which went quite beyond properly artistic questions, did not cease since that time to preoccupy the men of the eighteenth century, the result being that the rejection of artificial manners and conventions was to become, for certain ideologues, the best means of breaking down the barriers that keep citizens apart. But for the moment, let us note simply that, according to Dubos, when a painter does not precisely draw the lines of a character who is expressing this or that passion, he is not understood by viewers. In that case, he says, “the painter’s idea comes

to nothing and the character, instead of expressing a passion, does no more than make a grimace”.

Now, what we have here is a leitmotiv that can be tracked throughout the eighteenth century since, for many writers, grimacing is quite simply the main stumbling block artists must avoid when they endeavor to express the passions. I could cite several examples, but I am going to confine myself to one from Diderot, in his *Essay on Painting*, which, while being rather well known, has the merit of being concise and very clear in the advice he gives them: “Do not confuse at all the simpering airs, the grimaces, the little raised corners of the mouth, the small stiff lips, and a thousand other puerile affectations with grace, and still less with expression”. Though done with much less vigor, other writers — for example, Michel-François Dandr -Bardon — were in agreement in asking that painters absolutely avoid falling into the vice of painting grimaces, which are but mannered exaggerations.

It would be relatively easy to cite many other examples, but that would also be a bit tedious. What matters more, it seems to me, is that this notion of grimacing was gradually extended to a considerable degree in discourses on the arts and that, on the eve of the Revolution, it could even be used to denounce the search for artificial effects in literature. And then what one notices especially is that the denunciation of grimaces takes an increasingly polemical turn, going beyond the field of aesthetics to touch upon social criticism and even political criticism. And it is undoubtedly not an accident that this orientation loomed large in independent art criticism, the kind that appeared in France with  tienne La Font de Saint Yenne. Indeed, the latter considered grimacing as a sort of symptom characteristic of artists who were unable to change their style and who believed that they could remedy their expressive shortcomings by multiplying the number of violent and exaggerated poses: those artists, wrote La Font de Saint Yenne in his *R flexions sur quelques causes de l’ tat pr sent de la peinture en France*, “cast upon faces, and particularly upon gazes, an extravagant expression which becomes a grimace that is as indecent in the Sacred as is the comic in the profane”.

It is quite understandable that these flaws seemed all the more pernicious as fine-arts works had become accessible at that time to a broader public that, as one moves toward the very late eighteenth century, came in increasing numbers to the Louvre’s Salon exhibitions. That is why all those who took pride in giving advice to artists encouraged them to furnish correct and flattering expressions for their characters. And yet, in order to succeed in this endeavor one still had to find models of transparency and probity. Now, it is undoubtedly on this precise point that one can be witness to a surprising suture made between aesthetics and social criticism — one that played, as is known, a key role in revolutionary discourse.

Numerous articles in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclop die* had already championed this ideal of clarity and tranquility, in particular when it came to faces. And if one goes back to Watelet’s arguments, one can understand that, for the latter, grimacing was tied not only to affectation, simpering airs, and artifice but also, more generally, and to borrow his own terms, “to the whims of wealth”, to the “indulgences of indolence”, and to “all the adulterations of mores and taste”. Under such circumstances, it seemed to him quite difficult to find and to study models likely to inspire in artists a taste for genuine grandeur and simplicity. Now, it turns out that this argument was taken up again by other art critics in their reviews of the last Salon exhibitions under the Ancien R gime. Let us listen, for example, to what the anonymous author of the *Triumvirat des arts* stated in 1783: “Such a study is not possible in Paris. One could say that, there, each man is preoccupied only with self-distortion. The inviolable principle of each of the estates is to fool the others. All professions require an affected exterior. . . . In what places

open to the Public will our Artists espy Nature? Among the People, they will find hideous expressions; among the Great, fake expressions; in the middle ranks, common expressions”.

We can see here very well how a critical discourse on the arts affords one the occasion to recall the split between nature and society, a split into which the issue of “grimacing” fits perfectly. Now, while people during this period were obsessed with the problem of dissimulation and therefore with everything that might prove an obstacle to transparency, one of the great ambitions of those revolutionary times, to paraphrase Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was to see to it that all citizens felt that they are being viewed by the public at all times. Whence the success of various semiologies of the body and of the face that retain our attention, the first of which being, of course, physiognomy. But is it not possible, as a matter of fact, to be a bit more specific about how this joining of discussions about aesthetic matters with the utopia of transparency was performed? Studies devoted to representations of the body during the period of the Revolution have allowed one to bring out some quite distinct typologies, whether they be in texts or in images. Let me briefly recall that those typologies were based on a dialectal opposition between the affected, corrupt, and depraved body and the luminous body of the regenerated man. Of course, in this matter what held for the body as a whole and for its accessories (like clothing, hairstyles, and finery) also held for the face, since it continued to be considered truly revelatory of individual character. For, it is really there, one thought, that the marks of duplicity, of treachery, and of infamy are most clearly revealed. And yet those individuals who are so busy dissimulating their true nature — who are they and what exactly do they represent? According to the testimony of numerous witnesses, grimacing was a part of Court life: it pertained to games of intrigue and all the sorts of imitative expression in which such a life consists, in particular among conspirators. More generally, grimaces were often associated with the practices of the privileged classes, with excessive personal fastidiousness, and with the languor of a society that delighted in appearance and luxury. Their graphic equivalents are to be found, moreover, in revolutionary-era caricatures, where the scourge of aristocracy and the facial expressions of the falsely pious were roundly condemned. For, of course, in this matter neither the aristocracy nor the clergy were spared. Joseph-Marie Lequinio de Kerblay, a member of the Convention who had voted to condemn the king to death, is quite clear on this point. According to him, grimaces betray ignorance, conspiracy, hypocrisy, and fanaticism, in particular religious fanaticism. That said, disturbing grins and spurious facial expressions were in no way restricted solely to the nobility and the clergy. And it is not surprising that grimaces also became the distinctive signs of false republicans and of traitors.

In short, there is no doubt that, as much in the arts and letters and as in public life, the Age of Enlightenment was marked by a desire to be done with grimaces. But it is time now to ask whether the doctrinaire thinkers of that period were content to wait for the face of the new man to arise as if by miracle, like a sort of epiphany of Liberty, or whether, on the contrary, such an aspiration occasioned specific prescriptive recommendations on their part. And it is here that it seems useful to return again to Watelet’s article. Indeed, he affirms, on the one hand, that without study and without effort the painters will never succeed in grasping true and natural expressions. But on the other, he also seems to insinuate that the reform of the arts will undoubtedly be much more demanding than the reform of society and that it will perhaps have to precede the latter and even serve as an example for it. Now, if one adopts the standpoint of those who were going to aim more directly at the reform of mores — be they politicians, pedagogues, or hygienists — it does indeed seem that those people shared the idea that the abolition of bodily artifices would be attained only upon the expenditure of certain amount of effort. And while

Watelet's prescriptive recommendations were generally addressed to young artists and to professors charged with their education, the reformers of the revolutionary period were going to deem that the most effective means of eliminating grimaces would be to begin this work in childhood, when citizens are still malleable. It was therefore in his younger years that the new man would have to learn to reject the affectations and the playacting that should no longer deceive anyone in this new era.

Having reached this point, there is still another feature that seems to pose a problem. Indeed, while during the entire second half of the eighteenth century grimaces never ceased to be a metaphor for artifice, Watelet thought that, in order to avoid them, the study of nature was undoubtedly the best advice one could give to young artists. That is why he asked them to favor the study of great models — those who owe their glory, he said, to a truth men respect, even when they are the furthest removed therefrom. Now, once again it is in the joining of aesthetic discourse and sociopolitical discourse that this remark seems to take on its full meaning. Indeed, as an anonymous author wrote in 1795 in the press organ of the Ideologues, the *Décade philosophique*, within the new public space the revolutionaries were calling for with all their might, it no longer sufficed to be virtuous; one also had to seem so. What that implies, it seems to me, is that the issue of models became absolutely critical here, and this question was necessarily posed for those whose ambition it then was to fashion a regenerated model befitting the new man.

But kind of face might that be? Would it be man's original face? Would it be the one people had in places not corrupted by civilization, back when, as Rousseau had already said, we had not yet learned the art of fashioning our manners and policing our passions and when our mores were still rustic and natural? Would it be, in other terms, the one often attributed to pure peoples, to "natural" ones who know not the art of pretending? Would it be the sort of face seen where people live without priests and administrators, where there are no masters and no slaves? For, if grimacing belongs among the symptoms of a depraved and bloodless civilization whose social rituals are but lies, deception, and dissimulation, is it not logical then that the faces of primitive peoples would be the ones that have preserved the state of purity and innocence people's faces had at the origin?

That said, while the myth of the original could indeed feed the phantasm of a face unsullied by any artifice, it was not this model the doctrinaire thinkers of the time wanted to propose to young artists. Undoubtedly because they remained too influenced by the aesthetic criteria of academic classicism, it was the exactitude of proportions, but also the nobility and expressive truth of the masterworks of Antiquity to which they continued to refer throughout the revolutionary period. Of course, the dissemination and the impact of the writings of Winckelmann — for whom the sole means of ridding oneself of grimacing was to imitate the pure and unadorned faces of the Ancients — played here an important role. That role had to be all the greater as the effort was now directed toward articulating Winckelmann's ideas alongside those of Rousseau by offering parallels between the repose and the liberty of the savage and the ataraxia of the Stoic. In fact, this effort to connect the pure faces of peoples without luxury with the tranquil beauty of ancient models may clearly be observed among the Revolution's ideologues. As early as 1776, in his treatise entitled *De l'homme; ou des principes et des lois de l'influence de l'âme sur le corps, et du corps sur l'âme*, Jean-Paul Marat himself was quite explicit on the matter: "The Savages of America suffer on the Cross without letting out cries, without shedding tears, and they fear less the torments of the body than the infamy they associate with cowardice. Thus in olden times the intrepid Gladiator, after having received the fatal blow,

watched his blood flow with an air of disdain, struggling against the pain and yet preserving, as he died, that bearing of a warrior his trainers had taught him, for he feared less death than the shame of making a grimace, of heaving a cowardly sigh”.

This ideal — obviously one highly imbued with Neo-Stoicism — valued not only the impassive face of heroes who revealed their true nature in combat but also those of public personalities from Athens, Sparta, and Rome, the Socrateses, the Phocions, the Belisariuses, Catos, Senecas, and Brutuses whose full grandeur stemmed from all they were capable of enduring, both physically and morally, without flinching — which, in a certain way, takes us back to the much-talked-about aesthetic discussion surrounding the rediscovered *Laocoön* sculpture. As is known, busts from Antiquity were carried in this way during revolutionary celebrations as if they were emblematic of a society that liked to think of itself as new and innocent. And as some of the portraits of great revolutionary orators suggest, it was in modeling oneself on those exemplary figures of discipline, dignity, and moderation that new faces were supposed to reflect the moral rigor and the transparency of the new regime. Let me add, in conclusion, that the Revolution’s adversaries, too, perfectly well understood the advantage they could draw from wielding the grimace as an ideological weapon. Thus did they not deprive themselves of the pleasure of turning all those clichés around and applying them against those very people whom they especially loathed, and in the first place Robespierre, whose convulsive eye movements, furrowed brow, and pursed lips were often described as the marks of an ambitious, cruel, perfidious, and vindictive man. Compared by them to Medusa, Robespierre had to end up like this monster from mythology, some engravings showing us his grimacing decapitated head which seems to have lost none of its petrifying power.

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