

# Thinking Reality and Time through Film

Edited by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	viii
New Reasons to Establish Philosophy of Film Christine Reeh and José Manuel Martins	
<b>Part 1 – Mental Approaches: On the Nature of Time, Perception and Images</b>	
Chapter I .....	2
The Image of Temporality Maria-Teresa Teixeira	
Chapter II .....	9
Ethics and the Integrity of Gesture in Steve McQueen’s <i>Hunger</i> Susana Viegas	
Chapter III .....	22
Cinematographic Narrative and Personal Identity Carlos João Correia	
Chapter IV .....	35
The Phantasmatic Reality: A Phenomenological Study of the Cinematic Imagination Przemysław Bursztyka	
Chapter V .....	48
‘Back’ to the Window? A Husserlian Insight into Film Image Claudio Rozzoni	
Chapter VI .....	61
In Reality: The Ultimate Cinematic Quest José Manuel Martins	

Chapter VII.....	78
The Filmic Century/Centuries of the Mind: Tracing the Beginnings of the Subjective Cinema	
Atènè Mendelytė	
<b>Part 2 – Ontological Realism and Accessing Truth through Film</b>	
Chapter VIII .....	92
Bazin, Style, and Digitization: Ontology, Epistemology, and the New Myth of Total Cinema	
Leighton Grist	
Chapter IX .....	111
The Revolutionary Gaze into the Real: Dziga Vertov’s ‘Kino-Eye’	
Tatjana Sheplyakova	
Chapter X .....	128
The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology: Film, Time and Politics in Walter Benjamin	
Hyun Kang Kim	
Chapter XI .....	138
The Ontology of Film Image: A Conversation between Andrei Ujica and Peter Weibel	
Peter Weibel and Andrei Ujica	
Chapter XII.....	150
A Multimodal Theory of Film Experience	
Colin McGinn	
Chapter XIII .....	164
On the Rise of Solaristic Philosophy	
Christine Reeh	
Chapter XIV .....	180
Aesthetic-Philosophical Realism: How Intuition Matters for Ontology and Cinema	
Josef Frůchtl	

**Part 3 – Unmasking Violence: Trauma and Film**

Chapter XV.....	200
There is no Rewind-Button on the Beta-Mix of Life: Cruelty as Transgression and Virtualization in Michael Haneke’s ‘Funny Games’ Mirjam Schaub	
Chapter XVI.....	219
Mask Christoph Korn, Cristina Beckert and Maria João Madeira	
Chapter XVII.....	231
A Sort of Microscope of Time: Decelerated Movement and Archive Footage Susana de Sousa Dias	
Chapter XVIII.....	244
Green Leaves, Green Sorrows: On Víctor Erice’s Broken Glasses Maria Filomena Molder	
Chapter XIX.....	266
Unexpected Findings and Documentaries Vitor Moura	
Contributors.....	282

## CHAPTER XVI

### MASK

CHRISTOPH KORN, CRISTINA BECKERT  
AND MARIA JOÃO MADEIRA

#### **GESICHT / FACE II / 2011 / 2013**

A CHRISTOPH KORN movie

Text by Maria João Madeira

“I slept, but my heart kept watch”  
— from the Song of Solomon,  
quoted in the epigraph to FACE II

GESICHT or FACE II is the second segment of a complete movie lasting 12 hours, conceived by Christoph Korn from the 23 minutes of remaining images from the Nazi propaganda film THERESIENSTADT. EIN DOKUMENTARFILM AUS DEM JÜDISCHEN SIEDLUNGSGEBIET, shot in 1944 at the Theresienstadt concentration camp as a fake documentary about life in the "Terezin ghetto". For many Jews it was a mere stopover before deportation and extermination in Treblinka or Auschwitz. Claude Lanzmann dealt with this theme in his most recent movie THE LAST OF THE UNJUST (2013), considering Terezin a central element "in the genesis and development of the final solution". His film focuses on the controversial personality of Benjamim Murelstein, the last President of the Jewish Council of the Terezin ghetto and includes interviews with Murelstein shot in 1975, in Rome. In addition the film uses fragments of images from the original THERESIENSTADT, over which Lanzmann has superimposed subtitles to make the propagandist nature of the footage clear.

It is part of Second World War history that when Czechoslovakia was occupied in 1940 the Nazis transformed the fortress of Terezin into a political prisoners camp and, shortly afterwards, into a concentration

camp. Jews were resettled in a sort of ghetto within the fortress which was then presented as "evidence" of the non-nefarious activities of a "model ghetto", if such were possible. In the summer of 1944, the Nazi government engaged in a shameless "camouflage" operation when it invited a Danish Red Cross Delegation for a guided tour of Terezin, prepared and staged with brutal propagandist conformity to create the impression of a quiet community. These were the facts at the basis of *THERESIENSTADT. EIN DOKUMENTARFILM AUS DEM JÜDISCHEN SIEDLUNGSGEBIET*. The task of producing the film was placed in the hands of the Jewish director and actor Kurt Geron. He had started as a Max Reinhardt actor and became known alongside Marlene Dietrich in *DER BLAUE ENGEL*, having fled Nazi Germany in 1933. He was later arrested in Holland after the occupation and deported to the camps of Westerbork and Theresienstadt before finally being killed in Auschwitz in October 1944. The movie was intended to be showcased among the so-called neutral countries as a response to reports of persecution of the Jews, and there are records of at least one movie session in April 1945, for government and SS members. The project was interrupted by the final phase of the war and much of the completed movie footage was lost. The remaining images feature Terezin prisoners in day-to-day scenes of domestic life: in a concert room, relaxing in the sun or attending a lecture. Several decades later, brooding over the images, the German writer W. G. Sebald used the experience of the movie and of one of its photograms as a departure point for his romance *Austerlitz* (2001), in which the character slows the images of *THERESIENSTADT* in the hope of discovering his mother.

An audio-artist who explores the relationship of sound art with other media, with a background in philosophy and political science, Christoph Korn reworks these images by lingering on them, markedly changing their speed, and turning the near twenty minutes of images of *THERESIENSTADT* into the complete twelve hour version of *GESICHT / FACE*. In November 2011, Korn presented an audio-visual installation at Serralves, with the title *AUSTERLITZ DUPLICATE*, which repeated the procedure described in Sebald's book, intensifying the slowed down movement. The result was presented as a follow-up to the work dedicated by Korn to the "phenomena of 'duration', which he has been developing in recent years, namely through the application of suppression and retraction strategies. The realization of the capacity for persuasion and of the cynicism of this movie [*THERESIENSTADT*] affected Christoph Korn to such an extent that he decided to introduce changes to the temporal structure of the movie, so as to make it more transparent and decodable". It

is AUSTERLITZ DUPLICATE that, in its turn, is at the origin of GESICHT / FACE. As far as we know and not having been able to see the installation, it essentially resumes its image band, superimposing a soundtrack consisting of a conversation with Antoine Beuger in June 2012. The text that introduces GESICHT refers to Korn's motivation as having been guided "by the wish to point out temporal failures and holes in the apparently homogeneous narrative structure of the propaganda movie [...] The conversation is sustained by a sense of slow proximity and distancing, frequently in silence. During the conversation, a certain type of simultaneous reading acquires duration and power, condensing itself into the concept of 'Face' (Emmanuel Lévinas). From the perspective of the philosopher Lévinas, 'Face' is "... the other, he or she, that is revealed through the face".

The dismantling of the images, in the sense of analysis through a slowing glance which looks for a "magnifying glass" effect and lingers on each motif, configures a cinematic device which already has a history. The most apparent reference is the work of the Italian duo Angela Ricci Luchi and Yervant Gianikian who, since the early eighties, with DAL PÔLO ALL' EQUATORE, have worked with archive images about memory and forgetfulness according to the principle of the "analytic camera". This goes back to First World War images (PRIGIONERI DELLA GUERRA; SU TUTTE LE VETTE E PACE; OH, UOMO, directed between 1995 and 2004). A nearest reference is contained in the movies by Susana Sousa Dias, NATUREZA MORTA – VISAGES D' UNE DICTATURE, constructed from archive images shot between 1926 and 1974, and 48 (2009), which was conceived from a nucleus of prison records pictures of political prisoners during the Portuguese dictatorship. Korn's work is in the same vein, returning to "found footage" and focusing on questions of duration.

Having said that, FACE II is inseparable from the intrinsic shiver provoked by the power of the images which originated it, in their turn indistinguishable from the historic discourse they carry within themselves, from their propagandist nature to their reading as propaganda images. These are the interpretative levels on which Korn works, through the pronounced slowdown of the material, exposing it to questioning and reflection. It is this dimension that the soundtrack - a recorded conversation - emphasizes, through adjustments, reticence, breaks, and a lack of stupefaction, which makes the induced disquiet even more acute and intimate.

### Lecture by Christoph Korn

The 12 hour film work *Face* is based on the National Socialist propaganda film “Terezin: A Documentary Film of the Jewish Resettlement” from 1944.

Terezin, or in German language Theresienstadt, was a concentration camp. It was established by the SS during Second World War in the fortress and garrison city of Terezin. Terezin is located 60 Kilometers far from Prague.

Tens of thousands of people died in Theresienstadt concentration camp. More than 150,000 other persons (including tens of thousands of children) were held there for months or years, before being sent by rail transports to their deaths at Treblinka and Auschwitz extermination camps in occupied Poland, as well as to smaller camps elsewhere.

The Nazi propaganda film, on which the 12 hour film work *FACE* is based, was shot in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt in 1944.

The film was intended to show how well the Jews were living in the camp. If taken at face value, it documents the Jews of Theresienstadt living a comfortable existence. They had to comply and perform according to Nazi orders. As the film was not completed until near the end of the war, it was never distributed as intended, although a few screenings were held. Most of the film was destroyed, but 20 minutes of the film have survived.

The Propaganda film was directed by Jewish prisoner Kurt Gerron, an experienced director and actor. The shooting took eleven days, starting September 1, 1944. After the film was completed, most of the Jewish people you see in the film and the director himself were deported to Auschwitz and murdered there.

The first almost shocking impression I had while watching this propaganda film was my inability NOT to believe in the propaganda film. So well-constructed is the narrative structure of the film, that one almost MUST believe in it.

The film *FACE* is an attempt to introduce gaps in the temporal structure of the propaganda film by slowing it down, to thus “unball time” and make the film transparent and decodable.

The Film *FACE* slows down the NS Propaganda film by a factor of 30. On account of this, the temporal structure of the pictures begin to stutter. And one is able to look in between the pictures.

As I have already mentioned 20 minutes of the NS propaganda film survived. Slowing it down by a factor of 30 results in a total length of about 12 hours.



The result was a film with a duration of 12 hours. Each movement in the decelerated film is very very slow. The sound as well is modulated into a deep frequency structure. But still I felt that there was something missing. Then composer Antoine Beuger came up with the idea of introducing a conversation throughout the film and to replace the deep frequency sound with the conversation. Immediately I felt that this was the solution: To have the possibility to be somehow *with* the filmed people during the 12 hours.

The conversation Antoine Beuger and me had during the film took place on June 3, 2012.

We had no philosophical or theoretical idea before we met to converse during the film.

The conversation is borne by a peaceful, tentative, often silent sense of approaching and receding. In the course of the conversation, a type of reading gains both duration and power, a type that becomes condensed in the concept of the “Face” by Emmanuel Levinas. “Face” in the sense of the philosopher Levinas is “...the other, who reveals him or herself through the face.”

A part of the film is accessible online at: [http://www.christophkorn.de/gesicht/Gesicht\\_video.htm](http://www.christophkorn.de/gesicht/Gesicht_video.htm)

### **Lecture by Cristina Beckert**

First of all, I would like to thank the organization, in the person of Christine Reeh, for the kind invitation and the opportunity to be here today.

I’m not an expert on art or cinema; I’m more of an ethicist. But I couldn’t resist the opportunity to try to find Levinas’ concept of the face in Christoph Korn’s film, *Gesicht* – and that is what I have tried to do. My talk focuses on three brief points: firstly I would like to explain what Levinas understands by the face. Secondly I wish to apply this concept to the film, and thirdly I would like to raise one or two questions.

The first point: what is the face for Levinas? Well, it is a metaphysical and an ethical concept, which is to say that if we present the absolute otherness of the other, the other is not just another me, it is absolutely other – the consequence being that we can’t grasp it. We can’t grasp it through knowledge, we can’t grasp it through mere consciousness - we aren’t aware of it. So the face can’t be the totality of the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the hair: that is only what the face is -what it is: not who it is. I can say the face is of a young person, or an old person, an ugly face, a beautiful face, a female face, a male face, but that just describes what the

face is. It can never provide us with who the face is. And that is because the face, for Levinas, comes from another dimension. It comes from a dimension transcendent to the world. It comes from above. That's why we feel at stake before the face, and we must put the following question to ourselves: have I the right to be? Why myself, and not her or him? I'm talking about my identity. I have an identity: I am one with myself. I am happy with myself, ontologically one with myself. Where the other is suffering, is in misery, he has no self, he's devoid of self. That's the effect of the face on ourselves. And that's why the face is an ethical concept: it accuses us, it poses that terrible question of my right to be me, and not the other. And that's why Levinas' ethics are also an ethics of responsibility, because when I am aware of the other I can't remain myself. I have to give myself to the other, I have to be responsible for the other. This, I believe, is the main message of Levinas' concept of the face.

Now we can perhaps pass to the second point, and try to see how Levinas' face is in the film. I'd like to start with the verse at the beginning of the film, from the Song of Solomon, which says 'I am asleep, but my heart is awake'. We can interpret 'I am asleep' as I'm not conscious of the other: I'm just occupied and preoccupied perhaps with myself. I am just not aware of what's around me. But there is another level, a much more fundamental and radical level. Levinas called it the sensibility level, prior to consciousness. At this level I feel the other, and to feel the other is the right expression: I can't see the other, but I feel the other. At this level, the other is invisible. I do not see the mouth and the nose etc: I just feel the presence. But that raises a very big problem, because, as we have seen, the film is about faces, lots of faces, which are perfectly visible, and visible down to the smallest detail, because of the slow motion of the film. So how can we combine the invisible face of Levinas and the visibility of faces in a film? I think at certain moments something happens, which I would call following Levinas: the exasperation of visibility, the excess of visibility. Excess is a way for us to be in contact with the invisible, with the invisible face. So I agree, there is another film, a subliminal film, an invisible film, the film Kurt Geron made for his people; and it is made out of pure love. I believe it. These two levels are particularly striking in the way the scenes are constructed. Everything is staged: we can see women and men reading, and we know they are not really reading; we can see two neighbours at the window talking with each other, and we know they are not really talking; we see lots of women knitting – which is more of a Greek metaphor. Everything is very carefully arranged so that we can think that Jews are very well treated in Theresienstadt. But we know this is not true. And there's a moment in the film where we pass from one scene

to another and another, and that is the passage of God. Levinas talks about the track of God, “la trace de Dieu”, when God passes just to reassure His people that He is with them. I think there is the sudden presence of another time here. Levinas calls it diachronical time, time that can’t be synthesized in the present, because it has already passed, because it is always passing. We can’t fix it. We can’t grasp it with our conscience. I would put it as a question: perhaps this time that passes and we can’t grasp is the time of the film. But I am not able to answer the question, so I leave it for specialists to answer.

I would just like to analyse two brief scenes. The first I call the picnic scene, which perhaps illustrates the most Levinasian way of conceiving the face. It is seen there is a picnic going on, and that everybody has their own tasks. Christoph Korn talks about the derealisation of the human being, and he says that people are derealised because they are so concentrated on their tasks that they become like ghosts. I remember that the shadows of Plato’s cave are similar to this. It is the “realm of the dead”, and I agree. But there is the child, and the child looks directly at the camera, and looking directly at the camera, she is looking at us. And I believe that is the look of the face, looking directly at us. In a way, we can’t look at it: we can see the face of the child, the nose, the mouth, the eyes, but we can’t see the child looking at us. What we can see is the pupil of the eye, and the pupil of the eye is black. We can’t see anything, but she is looking at us by means of her pupil. So, we are in a situation where we are seen directly, but we ourselves cannot see. So, we are absolutely passive, we must offer ourselves to that look. It is compulsive to give ourselves to it. That is the effect the face has upon us. And it is our responsibility not to let those people be ghosts. I think that is the main message of the film.

The second scene is where we see people listening to music. I think there is an ambiguity and a dilemma in this scene. On the one hand, people are totally absorbed by the music, by the rhythm, by the melody, and Levinas would say that they are out of themselves, as if hypnotized by the music, very concentrated on the music, and so they are not themselves. But Christoph Korn says they are totally concentrated on themselves, and that they are untouchable – and this is very curious. There are here two very different interpretations: they are out of themselves, they are concentrated on themselves.

I think, to understand this concentration of the people on themselves, there is a technical detail: the imperfections of the film that we can see because of the slow motion. It is very important even to Levinas, because the face, in order to mean, to signify something, must be erased, its

visibility must be erased in order to mean. And that's why Levinas admires the French sculptor of Estonian origin Sacha Sosno. He makes sculptures about heads with hollow faces, human bodies without parts, without a foot, an arm, even without a head, to express precisely the derealisation of the contemporary human.

So, it is absolutely necessary for the figure of the face to be erased, in order to signify something and have power. Music can have that power. Music can decompose the face and express its power to signify ethically.

I have two questions for Christoph Korn. The first is about this concentration on tasks. You say: "I am human because I am immerse". And I would like to understand if you view any ambiguity in this proposition or not. Isn't this a form of derealisation?

The second question is about reading. You say Nazi propaganda films about non-Germans would never show people reading. They would show people swimming, or walking on the forest, or any other sport, but not reading. Do you think this was intended to indirectly show the Jewish people as the people of the Book, or do you think it is a way for Kurt Geron to make his own film about Jewish people?

### **The response from Christoph Korn**

First of all, I would like to thank for your subtle reflection on Levinas and the film *Face*. I am particularly impressed by what you say about the characters looking directly into the camera and, in this way, at us, the viewers. While working on the film, I was struck again and again by these scenes, in which people look directly at us, so I have searched for them throughout the film, repeatedly. To this day, I feel unsettled by these scenes, but have not been able to put this phenomenon into words. But in my regard, you now came up with a wonderful thought – the idea that we experience a basal category of Levinas' concept of "face" in those looking at us – namely a sort primordial passivity. We have to endure, even to suffer, the "face" of the other and ethical principles emanating from it. The face makes – whether we want it or not – a claim upon us: speak well of me, respect me, do not hurt me. Yes, I agree with you, our responsibility rests in such a look, in such a "*benedicto*".

To your first question: to be immersed and derealization. Antoine Beuger and I have discussed the concept of derealization in the film discussion with reference to Judith Butler. Butler shows, that certain people or groups of people are derealized by specific discourses. They become ghosts, shapeless, disembodied, without names. Yes, sometimes in

the movie *Face*, we see those people, who seems like they are ghosts, and you inevitably imagine a kind of realm of the dead.

But what we further can see in the concert scene, that you address, are people, who listen to some music. We see faces, that are completely absorbed by the music. And that seems very different, than being derealized. People appear beyond the reach of any propaganda, beyond the reach of any reification and derealization in their immersion. "I am a human being because and as long as I am immersed deeply in myself and in the music." Probably, this is the promise of all music, that as long as it lasts, nothing can happen to me, I feel safe and secure at every instant. One can see this in the people's faces. At least Antoine Beuger and I saw it that way.

To your second question: the director of the Nazi propaganda film, Kurt Gerron, who was himself a Jew, was later accused of having collaborated with the Nazis for the film. Of course, he did this in a certain way, for – within such a coercive system – how could that have been possible otherwise. But he has also -or perhaps mainly- made a film about "his" people, which can be even better perceived in the slower 12-hour version. From time to time, the people, who the Nazis thought of as pure propaganda, are provided with great dignity and humanity in Gerron's cinematic look. Also, you mentioned the symbol of the "book," which, we believe, was not used so extensively in the film as a metaphor solely by chance.

Strikingly, for example, is also with what intensity and duration Kurt Gerron filmed the sky. Some camera settings are clearly divided into two parts: in one half, you see something, that you can sell to clients as propaganda; the second part of the composed image, however, forms pure heaven. Sometimes one has the impression, that such pictorial compositions have the sole purpose of palming the first part off on the Nazis and of giving the detainees the other part, namely the heavens.

At these points in the movie, I always have to think of Walter Benjamin's late words in the text "Theses on the Philosophy of History." It says something like: "For the Jews, at every second in the future there was the narrow gate, through which the Messiah could enter." And whoever has kept his childlike imagination knows, that when the Messiah comes to redeem us, he comes down from heaven.





