

Life & Arts

The problem with taking people at face value

Making character judgments based on this one element has wider consequences. Can we learn to train our primal instinct better?

Nilanjana Roy



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Our carpenter dropped by the other day. We'd asked him for a pretty unusual design: reproduction folio pages from an imperial Mughal manuscript (*Padshahnama*) set like inlaid tiles into the door of a book cupboard.

Kanhaiya did a beautiful job. But as he took a few photographs of his work afterwards, he suddenly stopped: "Look! I'm in that painting!" he exclaimed. And so he was. Or at least his face was, grafted as if by magic on to the visage of a courtier bowing to the emperor, painted about 1656-57. We gathered around to marvel at the likeness, travelling back across the centuries.

Kanhaiya went quiet. Then he said: "I don't mind sharing my face with someone from the past."

If it was from today, would you feel differently? I asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Everyone likes to feel their face is their own, no?”

Many of us will share Kanhaiya’s feeling, even though there seems to be little logic behind it. The human face hasn’t changed over millennia, so we’re wearing the same kinds of faces that people did thousands of years ago. We often resemble humans who’ve come before us — one reason why faces in Mughal art or the illustrations for *The Canterbury Tales* look reassuringly familiar.

So, with 7.5bn humans in the world and rising, the idea that most of us have unique faces should be an astounding one. Wouldn’t it be plausible that, as there were more of us, we’d see more lookalikes? Instead, we seem to have developed in the opposite way.

In 2014, Michael J Sheehan and Michael W Nachman, researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, presented evidence that human faces have evolved to signal individual identity. The face, they said, was the main way that we recognise people (more than height, gait, voice). As Sheehan noted, “It is clearly beneficial for me to recognise others, but also beneficial for me to be recognisable.”

We are primed to pick out individual faces from literally thousands of others — and perhaps we react to people’s faces far more strongly than we realise. We seem to do this swiftly, often, without conscious thought, forming strong personality impressions and making character judgments based on this single element. As the scientists Alexander Todorov, Christopher C Said and Sara C Verosky have written: “Whether or not trait inferences from faces are accurate, they affect important social outcomes.”

Some of these are predictable — the owners of faces judged as attractive have better job prospects and earning potential than their less attractive peers; baby-faced people are less likely to be found guilty in small-claims court trials. But Todorov and his colleagues caution against over-generalising, pointing out that the public perception of a politician as competent or not would influence electoral success far more strongly than would facial attractiveness. Even so, it’s surprising how many studies confirm that we often infer personality traits from faces — even when they’re wrong. If only we could train this primal instinct better.

Look at it from another perspective. Some estimates suggest that 1 out of 50 people have some degree of facial recognition problems, a condition known as prosopagnosia. My own version is minor. It can take a few moments before my brain matches face to individual. In most cases,

people don't realise they haven't been recognised — but when they do they are truly hurt. To not be able to place someone's name is a relatively minor offence. To be unable to place their face cuts directly at their sense of identity, the deeply human belief that we matter and are memorable. "Don't you know who I am?" one former classmate said to me in real anguish.

In response to moments like this, I've developed the habit of smiling abstractedly at the world at large, just in case it contains someone I should recognise. It has had the positive side-effect of making most interactions far friendlier than they used to be. It also gives me the smallest taste of how disruptive life might be for those who can't operate the way most of us do. Being unable to recognise even your own family members, or someone you've met that morning, must be incredibly stressful.

It's not only scientists who are wary of taking the world at face value. Poets too are wise on the subject. "You have to look beyond the face / to see the person true," Benjamin Zephaniah warned in the poem "Faceless". "To leave behind that backward state / of judging looks is very great."

Nilanjana Roy is the author of 'The Wildings' and 'The Hundred Names of Darkness' and lives in Delhi. [@nilanjanaroy](#)

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