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Thinking Through New Media
Paper Proposal
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Beautiful Agony: The Face in New Media

This paper explores a new site in the long history of the technological mediation of facial expression. Episodes in this history include: the techniques of the 17th century painter Charles LeBrun for capturing the “passions” of the face; Charles Darwin’s commissioning of Oscar Gustave Rejlander to produce photographs for his book on the expression of emotions; and the psychologist Paul Ekman’s training videos for detecting the facial cues of liars. In each case, the effort to solve the puzzle of facial expression is also a technological attempt to stabilize the connection between interiority and exteriority, private and public, individual and collective. It is a response to the essential ambiguity of the face understood as at once (to use Ekman’s terms) both “emotional readout” and “social display.”

How has this problem been inflected by new media? What is new about the digital/online mediation of facial expression? I want to consider these questions through a close examination of what at first might seem a surprising object: an “erotic” website originating in Australia called *Beautiful Agony: facettes de la petite mort*. The site features four-to-six-minute long WMV and MOV videos of female and male contributors masturbating. Its aesthetic innovation is that the videos are all framed from shoulders up, where, as the website proclaims, “people are truly naked.” While denying the user visual access to the bodies of its masturbating “artists,” the corporeality of this very physical spectacle is paradoxically intensified through a forced attention to two traditionally disembodied figures of the human—the face and the voice. At the same time the typical anonymity of porn—of the interchangeability of generic bodies—is displaced by the utter non-interchangeable particularity of a person’s face in close-up. Finally, the duration of the video, the narrative arc, if you will, as it leads up to the “artist’s” orgasm, displays the loss of individual self in the classic “la petite mort.” In doing all this, the site both instantiates and breaks down the binaries—interior/exterior, private/public, individual/collective—that characterize technological efforts to capture the ambiguous nature of facial expression.

As we attempt to think about the pervasive online mediation of the face, an uncanny site like *Beautiful Agony* helps to thematize the problematic of the digital face as such. It is a site of what Mark Hansen, in discussing the work of Bill Viola, calls the “technical expansion of self-affection.” In this paper I will pursue a close examination of *Beautiful Agony* as way of concretizing the implications of this expansion. I will use it as a way to consider the digital life of facial expression and the new forms of intersubjectivity (sexual and otherwise) that life may hold in store.

