

NONFICTION REVIEW

# Review: Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions by Alexander Todorov

Oliver Moody on why first impressions matter so much — and why they shouldn't

Oliver Moody

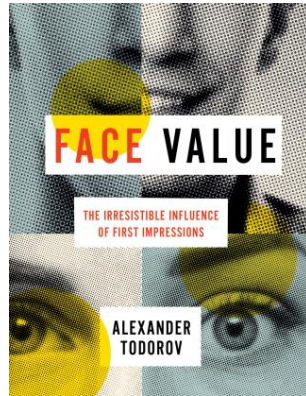
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Jean and Franois Robert's photos see personalities in things  
FRANCOIS ROBERT PHOTOGRAPHY

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A baby macaque grows up in a world without faces. You might think this is the plot of an Angela Carter short story that was spiked by her



publishers for being a bit too weird. It really happened, though, in a Japanese lab ten years ago.

For up to two years, the only objects the monkeys saw were toys without faces and researchers wearing flat masks. Yet when the monkeys saw macaque and human features for the first time, they were gripped by an instinct rising from the depths of their evolutionary past. Tests showed that the monkeys preferred to look at faces than other objects.

Human babies are drawn to faces within their first ten minutes in the world, even though their vision is a blurry mess with acuity 15 times worse than an adult's. Other experiments have shown that face-specific cells in grown-ups' brains fire in recognition when they see clocks, apples and even toilet brushes — anything that might resemble a face.

If you doubt this, look up the photographs of headphones, mops and alarms taken by Jean and François Robert. We not only see faces in random objects, but give them distinct

characters. Even the crudest schematic of a few lines whipped up on Microsoft Paint will do the trick.

We are, in short, more compulsively interested in faces than in anything else above waist height. Why? This is a question that has bothered Alexander Todorov, a professor of psychology at Princeton University, for more than a decade.

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**Looking more capable than your opponent wins you an extra 5 per cent of the vote.  
Looking more attractive adds 10 to 20 per cent**

Todorov is best known for discovering that, simply by showing people pictures of two politicians for as little as a 30th of a second and asking which is the more competent, you

can predict about three quarters of election results. On average, looking more capable than your opponent wins you an extra 5 per cent of the vote. Looking more attractive adds 10 to 20 per cent.

Unconvinced? In 2009 two Swiss scientists got children to play a computer game in which they sailed Odysseus home from Troy to Ithaca. Then they were shown photographs of two rival candidates for the French parliament and were told to choose one to captain their ship. They picked the winner 70 per cent of the time.

It would be easy to draw the conclusion that faces are windows to the souls of strangers — easy, but very wrong. *Face Value* sets out a persuasive and fascinating argument that they are a pretty good tool for assessing people you know well, and a pretty rubbish one for those you don't.

This makes sense, after a fashion. The anthropologist Jared Diamond has suggested that only in the past 7,500 years have we had to decode the faces of people from outside our social group. That might explain why we tend to do worse than chance when we are asked to decide somebody's sexual orientation or political allegiances by looking at their picture.

Most of the time we see what we want to see. Canon Australia once invited six professional photographers into its lab to make portraits of a

man called Michael. They were given ten minutes to get to know him and “flesh out the essence of who he is”, but each was given a different back story; Michael was a psychic, a life-saving hero, a fisherman, an ex-convict. Each of the images they took exquisitely reflected the essence of the Michael they had been told about.

Then there is what might in Britain be termed the bacon sandwich problem. Our prodigious overconfidence in our ability to judge people by their faces opens us up to merciless exploitation. It works both ways. Ed Miliband’s grapple with what is, to be fair, a technically challenging breakfast item gave the public absolutely zero information about his suitability for prime minister. Yet it counted against him as much as any Tory character assassination.

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**Darwin was almost kept off the Beagle because the captain disliked his nose**

On the other hand, Abraham Lincoln, a man with a face that only a patriot could love, grew a beard to boost his

appeal and was the first American presidential candidate to disseminate copies of his portrait among the electorate. One study even suggests that at the height of the Iraq war George W Bush's bellicose features may have helped him to steal the 2004 election from the squid-faced John Kerry.

Todorov's plainly written and readable book is generously illustrated with faces from psychological experiments and stocked to the rafters with trivia. The features we depend on most heavily to identify emotion, for example, are not eyes but eyebrows. For the ideal selfie you should eat spinach, pumpkins or tangerines for their complexion-flattering carotenoid content. The apparent age of our faces is the strongest clue to our longevity apart from our actual age.

Yet it is all in the service of a serious point. Todorov's nemesis is a 2,400-year-old branch of pseudoscience known as physiognomy that claims that a person's traits can be inferred from their face. It originated with Aristotle and in its time beguiled intellectuals from Goethe to Francis Galton, the English father of statistics. In the 19th century Cesare Lombroso, a nasty

sort of inverse renaissance man who contrived to be wrong about almost every part of criminology, called for children with criminal-looking philtrums or feckless cheekbones to be segregated from their “better-endowed companions”.

Physiognomy nearly cost us the theory of natural selection. In 1831, as Charles Darwin was preparing to board the *Beagle*, its captain took exception to the shape of Darwin’s nose and suggested that he did not have “sufficient energy and determination for the voyage”. “I think,” Darwin later wrote, “he was afterwards well-satisfied that my nose had spoken falsely.” Mercifully the theory did not catch on with British MPs, who in 1741 passed a statute deriding physiognomists as “rogues and vagabonds” ripe for public whipping.

However, Todorov fears it is coming back into vogue. Faception, an Israeli technology company, claims to be able to sift terrorists and paedophiles out by using facial-profiling software. A small number of scientists are using the ratio of facial width to height to make claims about people’s aggression, trustworthiness and open-mindedness.

Perhaps, though, this dubious research is only a dying echo of our Pleistocene obsession with faces and, in its own way, a backhanded compliment to the value of Todorov's work.

***Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions* by Alexander Todorov**

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