

## FACE/FAÇADE: THE VISUAL AND THE ETHICAL

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**Abstract.** Face and façade share not only the same etymological derivation, but also the appeal to the visual perceptual apparatus. Their operation as visual signs/texts, however, reaches far beyond the merely iconic; in the context of the Western culture, face and façade perform the role of the exterior as symbolically representing the interior. In spite of what they have in common, the two concepts connote different ethical values. Face, especially in the Levinasian sense, implies absolute sincerity and truthfulness; façade, as a “face of the building,” is in fact a simulacrum of the interior; it implies excess and uses performative-rhetorical devices of deception. Yet the metonymical representation of the inside by the façade naturalizes – through semiotic conventions and games – its fraudulently excessive character; it is only when façade – in its derivative sense as mask – returns to the face and becomes its metaphorical substitute, that its negative ethical value comes to the fore. The paper explores and theorizes – with intercultural references – the semiotic operation of face and façade, as well as provide analyses of visual examples.

**Keywords:** face, façade, mask, metonymy, performative, rhetorical.

*Façade, face of a building.*  
Walter W. Skeat (1948: 178)

### Introduction

Façade is the face of the building, as Walter W. Skeat explains in his *Etymological Dictionary*. It would certainly be inappropriate and implausible to suspect the author of a classical etymological dictionary of a penchant for trivial metaphors – the statement used as a motto for the present paper is well rooted in the historical origin of both words. Let us briefly recall: the English word *façade* comes from the Italian *facciata* (exactly: “face of a building”), while *face* from the Latin *faciē* (Italian *faccia*). This common origin, however, makes possible a two-directional operation of the metaphor: *façade* is a the face of a building, but also a human face may take on the shape of *façade*; I will return to this bi-directionality at the end of the paper<sup>1</sup>.

Etymology, however, not only exposes the semantic kinship of face and *façade*, but also reveals their less obvious features: namely their facticity and activeness. Both words relate to Latin *facere* (to do, to make), which is also the origin of *fact* (Latin *factus*, the past participle of *facere*). These affiliations are again confirmed in Slavonic languages: the genesis of Polish *twarz* (face) can be found in the complex meanders of the verb *tworzyć* (make, create): Church Slavonic *twor* – creation, *stwor* – deed, act, *potwor* – slander). The essence of both face and *façade* – contained in their proto-lexical core – is then activity, making facts.

This predisposition of face and *façade* to act – as revealed by etymology – may come as a surprise: the face – unlike arms, legs or brain – is not (maybe with the exception of lips) fashioned to perform actions, while *façade* is, by its very nature, a stable and static object. However, their activity cannot be measured

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this text in Polish has been published as „Iwarz, maska, fasada”, *Kultura Współczesna*, 2006, 3(49): 15–34.

by the banal conduct of everyday life. The activity of face and *façade* relates to the basic dichotomy between the inside and the outside, and manifests itself as an unveiling of what is hidden and invisible, and what would have remained invisible were it not for the *f/act* of externalization. In contrast to the countless variety of possible actions, the activity is one-sided and, one could say, monotonous, and yet it reaches into ethical and existential realms; both face and *façade* – in a way passive in their activity – send us beyond themselves – even though each does it in its own different manner.

### Face and mask

Face is an exclusively human attribute. If, from the ontological perspective, the Heideggerian Dasein is a unique kind of being because it is privileged with the ability to comprehend Being (*das Sein*), then from the axiological perspective what makes the human being unique is the Face. It is the Face “that decides of the radical distinction between the human world and the world of things [...] things do not have faces and cannot reveal their unique identity; man does it by unveiling his face.” (Jędraszewski 1990: 137). This uniqueness of the face consists primarily in its unconditionally ethical character: as Emmanuel Levinas writes, “access to the Face is ethical from the very beginning.” (Lévinas 1982: 50; trans. mine). **The Face is an unveiling of a defenceless interior, but it is also a moral imperative: it commands us to take responsibility for the Other *irrespective* of circumstances. and at the same time – on the other extreme, so to speak – it contains a moral prohibition to kill: “The face is exposed, in danger, as if it were inviting violence. At the same time the face is what forbids killing. [...] ‘Do not kill’ is the first word of the face” (Lévinas 1982: 51; trans. mine), writes Levinas. And elsewhere: “For in reality, killing is possible. But it is possible only when one has not looked the Other in the face. *The impossibility of killing is not real, but moral*” (Lévinas 1990: 10; italics. mine). In other words, physics and biology allow killing; what forbids it is the ethics of the Face. Moreover – in the transcendental dimension – the Levinasian Face provides access to the essence of being, although in the sense radically different from the Heideggerian one: not in the ontological, but in the metaphysical, religious and ethical dimension. For Levinas, it is in the Face that the Infinite is manifested: “the Face of the Other becomes God’s word” (Pieszak 2003: 136; trans. Mine), “the Face means the Infinite” (Lévinas 1982: 58; trans. mine).**

In Levinas’s philosophy the face is elevated to the highest rank in the hierarchy of distinctive human qualities and values. Yet this apogee of privileging the face as a moral imperative and endowing it with a deeply ethical sense is by no means a philosophical coincidence, an odd fancy of a thinker, or some idiosyncrasy alienated from tradition. On the contrary: putting the face on a pedestal so high would not be possible if that pedestal were not based on a solid foundation and if the unique role of the face as an emanation of human interiority were not deeply rooted in the tradition of the Western culture (which is made evident by the history and importance of the portrait as a distinct visual genre in which face and facial expression play a central role). However, in the Western culture the ethical character of the face is manifested not so much, or at least not primarily, in its asymmetrical devotion to the other (which is the core of Levinas’s message) but rather in its ethical relation to the hidden truth of the interior, which it discloses. The face is a primordial metaphor of the unveiling of the internal.

In the realm of human relations, the Western culture is the culture of the face. Meeting someone *face to face* means not only a personal encounter, but also a promise of *anagnorisis*, recognition, opening and unveiling of oneself. “Expression consists in revealing something through a medium. My emotions are expressed by my face” (Taylor 1994: 690), writes Charles Taylor in *The Sources of the Self*. Face is a means of articulating and externalizing the of a person’s internal nature and depth; as such, however, it is always subject to judgment, whose criteria are sincerity and truthfulness. The task of the face is to speak and tell the truth of the interior; if it lies it ceases to be a face and becomes a mask. Contrary to the authenticity of the face, masks are “portative uniforms” (Bauman 1996: 153). Face reveals the depth of the interior in its unpredictability and uniqueness. Face is read iconically; mask, in the last analysis, refers to conventions, even though it always attempts to create appearances of authenticity.

The appearance of a mask, writes Zygmunt Bauman, is always accompanied by “the nightmare of deception” (Bauman 1996: 154). The task of the face is to speak (concealed) truth, the task of the mask consists in lying, in a deceitful attempt to smuggle illusion. If – from the perspective of an encounter – the Face externalizes the depth of the other, then the deceitful self-creation of the mask, a conscious imposition upon the face of an “expression,” which supposedly speaks from the inside, but in fact only delivers pretence, amounts to a hypocritical tactics of covering the face with a *façade*.

The only instance when the mask does not rely on this deliberate tactics is the death mask: the material testimony of the last “expression of the face” – the one which links being and non-being, life and death. The death mask loses its moral character; it becomes ethically neutral. Such a mask is no longer “put on” or “worn” for strategic or performative purposes. The body is already silent and will not partake in any deceitful word or gesture. The death mask is “taken” off the face as a material portal to memory, whose future task will be to facilitate access to the perfection of the interior.

### Façade

The activity of the façade – despite its semantic kinship with the face – is from the very start different from the activity of the latter. Façade as the “face” of a building is essentially deprived of the capacity of a truthful unveiling of the inside. Façade is a *simulacrum* of the interior, its inferior copy – inferior, however, not because of lack or insufficiency in reflecting the inside, but on the contrary – inferior because of excess, exaggeration and surplus.

Walls belong to the material substance of a building – they constitute its indispensable parergon, separating the inside from the outside; façade is contingent – it is a parasitic Third, located on the parergon. The status of the façade as Third is paradoxical – it transgresses the opposition between the inside and the outside, but does it in double way: it is an “external” parasite, a parergon’s mask, and at the same time its task is to pretend to speak from the inside, to externalize *with excess* what is hidden behind it. Walls belong to the structure of an building, but they simultaneously constitute and construct the external space – they communicate with the users of that space. This communication may take on various forms: the stern walls of the communist blocks of flats either kept a gloomy and ominous silence or their speech was transparent; the modernist steel and glass edifices whisper monotonously. Façade, even though not indispensable, delivers a loud, garrulous and frequently a boastful monologue<sup>2</sup>.

The epiphany of the face commences a dialogue with the other; the face speaks, inviting a response. Façade speaks from a pedestal, always with excess,

sometimes with hypocrisy, and sometimes only with exaggeration and vanity.

What is more, façade only partly and indirectly relates to the interior – one might say that it veils the interior’s inferiority with respect to itself. In an equal, or perhaps even a greater measure, façade simulates qualities and values of its owner – a private person, a financial, bureaucratic or religious institution. As an ornament added to the structure, façade does not hide the interior, or hides it in a deceitful way, promising more than one actually finds inside. Being in appearance “the face of a building” it is in fact a mask of its owner. If the discourse of the face is essentially ethical (ethical from the start, as Levinas wants it), than the proposal made by the façade is essentially unethical. Façade is an ethical caricature of the face.

### Face and mask

As we have seen, the way the façade acts is at odds with etymology. Façade is not the face of a building, but its mask; it is also a mask of the owner. And yet, despite the previous unfavourable remarks, façade in fact evades anathema. If it is only death that saves the human mask from negative ethical judgement, such a judgement does not concern the façade at all. Our culture’s attitude towards the façade-mask is ambivalent. Mask put on the face as an indication of insincerity, hypocrisy or manipulation, generally invites condemnation; façade *ornamenting* a building is perceived as something accepted and normal. In fact, we expect from a grand and massive edifice that it shows us its “face,” even though we are aware that this face is not quite truthful and honest.

This naturalization of the façade is not a modern development, but has been ingrained in our culture since the Hellenic era. In *Ten Books on Architecture* from 70 BC, Vitruvius, who continues the Greek tradition, does not even mention ethical issues related to the façade. For Vitruvius, the presence of the façade is obvious and natural, and does not in the least measure invoke questions of morality.

An indirect explanation of this “naturalness” can be found in a passage devoted to what might be called social decorum: a close dependence of the grandeur and ornamentation of buildings on the social status of their owners: houses in towns and farming houses, houses for the rich and happy, houses for those who rule the republic must all be built in different ways; mediocre people do not need magnificent atria, tablina or vestibules, while they are needed by bankers or politicians,

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to façade not simply as a front wall, as is sometimes done, but in the classical sense of an especially designed wall distinguished by richer ornamentation.

who also require more magnificent ornamentation and more spacious houses appropriate to their status: “So if the position of particular individuals is taken into consideration while devising an architectural project of a house,” writes Vitruvius, “no one will find fault with such buildings” (Witruwiusz 1956: 108–109; trans. mine).

Andrea Palladio, the 16th century follower of Vitruvius’s architectural ideas, is much more clear on the role of façade. In Chapter XIV (on villas), Palladio asserts that he constructed the pediment “on the front façade encompassing the main portal, because such pediments indicate the entrance and add magnificence and grandeur to the dwelling, their frontage being this way distinguished; apart from that they are suitable for insignia and emblems of the builder, usually placed in the middle of the façade” (Palladio 1955: 141; trans. mine). Here also the excess characteristic of the façade (“adding splendour and dignity to the dwelling”) is unquestionable and does not invoke any ethical connotations. This self-evident nature of the façade is well illustrated by the fact that *each* of the architectural blueprints in Palladio’s work is accompanied by a project of an appropriate façade (as in Fig. 1).

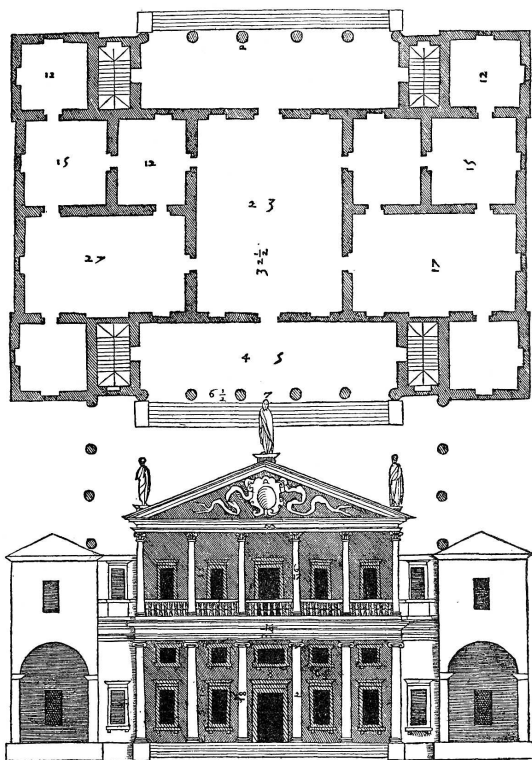


Fig. 1. Palladio's blueprint

There seem to be at least two important causes of such an ethical neutralization of the façade: on the one hand, its rhetorico-performative activity and on the other hand its aesthetic appeal.

The rhetoricity of the façade consists in its performative function, which, however, is not usually regarded as a lie. Aristotle, as Steffen Dietzsch notes, distinguishes various nuances of misleading. Dietzsch points out that Aristotle, of course, does not consider this kind of conduct as ethically good, but that he also does not consider it simply wrong: misleading belongs to a ‘median’ kind of conduct. On a “ladder of deception” we will, therefore, find also a vain man and a braggart, for – in Aristotle’s opinion – people lie either because they like doing it or for the sake of self-promotion or profit (Dietzsch 2000: 31). Façade is, in fact, such a braggart trying to draw attention to itself. Rather than in terms of a clear dichotomy: truthfulness – lie, we should speak about façade’s vanity and boastfulness.

What Dietzsch, referring to H. Bahr, says about modernity in general, applies very well to the activity of the façade: “What is important for me is not what is true, but what I need,’ which means that ‘it is not truth but illusion’ that becomes the central category of human life” (Dietzsch 2000: 65). The role of façade is to create an illusion which will metonymically radiate upon its interior or its owner – be it a person, an institution, or a political power. If such an illusion incidentally turns out to correspond with facts, it still does not change the performative character and role of the façade.

We may observe, then, that the rhetorical activity of the façade takes place on two levels: the façade only pretends that it imitates, while in fact it takes advantage of its privilege to exaggerate. It creates an illusion, which the viewer should allegedly regard as a true declaration of status, but – aware of the façade’s rhetoricity – he never treats that declaration literally. Façade becomes here a field of sign play whose rules are clear and transparent, and it is this transparency of rules that effectively defends the façade against the charge of deceit or insincerity: the creator of the façade and the viewer enter into a dialogue based on a convention clearly known to both of them – the convention of exaggeration and excess. The metonymical representation of the owner (person, institution) or of the interior belongs among ethically harmless rhetorical stratagems because what is represented is at the same time present to view: the *signifié* (the owner, the interior) is subject to continual juxtaposition with the rhetorical

*signifiant* (the façade); one can empirically and with one's own eyes compare the performative-rhetorical effect with the reality beyond and outside the façade. On the "ladder of deception," façade is then situated in the domain of rhetorical intimation, and pretty far from forthright lie (as is the case when deceitful object displaces the represented one, and is substituted for it). Its rhetorical and performative force lies in its ability to create counter-factual reality. This kind of performativity remains in the sphere of socially acceptable conventions of signifying practices, and becomes one of the reasons for its ethical neutralization.

Apart from rhetorical-performative activity, the other reason for the ethical neutralization of the façade is its aesthetic effect. In his book on lying, Dietzsch reminds us of certain ancient truth, namely that artistic activity uses subtle techniques and methods, and like deception, relies on a synthesis of appearance and knowledge. Art, writes Dietzsch, requires exaggeration, excess, unrestraint, and masks, and not simply an imitation of reality (Dietzsch 2000: 76). Even if the rhetorical-performative activity of the façade were not sanctioned by social conventions – even if one were aware of a certain degree of its rhetorical insincerity – it would still be counterbalanced by its aesthetic appeal satiating the desire for excess and exaggeration. In contrast to the main bulk and the interior of a building, where practical functions dominate<sup>3</sup>, in the façade it is the performative and aesthetic functions which come to the fore, the former quite frequently contributing to the latter. One might also claim that the façade also fulfils the practical role of organizing external space – its shaping, cutting, or consolidating – but such a claim would not really be valid. In fact, this function is performed by the parergon of the building; it is the external walls that form the space of a street, square or city. The absence of a façade does not change anything (or changes very little) in the geometrical and topographical organization of space; its presence, on the other hand, brings in aesthetic values. The role of façade – the "parasitic" Third – consists in the aestheticization of space, in co-creation of space appealing to the senses. This is why a tourist strolling the streets of Madrid, Barcelona or Mexico, admires the magnificence of bourgeois and colonial architecture, but – when taking another photo – never bothers to reflect on the ethical sense of the "face" (or "mask") of a building.

<sup>3</sup> Care and attention given to such functions are very well exemplified in the works of Vitruvius and Palladio quoted earlier in this discussion.

Even if façade could be seen as a kind of symbolic, or better iconic-symbolic violence, one has to be predisposed, as Pierre Bourdieu writes, in order to yield to such violence (Bourdieu 1992: 51), the predisposition being determined primarily by one's participation in the generally accepted rhetorical-symbolic-aesthetic conventions. Let us add, as an aside, that it is a violence of the sweet kind: even though we are "under the impression" of a façade – its beauty, garrulousness and excess – we give in to and gladly accept the violence it exerts.

I will finish these remarks on the rhetorical-performative and aesthetic activity of the façade with a rather unusual example of a building whose role is almost entirely reduced to its performative function, with aesthetic function and (residual) practical function totally subdued to it.



**Fig. 2.** A façade in Leon, northern Spain

The structure visible in the picture is not really a building, but an overblown façade. However, it is not a remnant of a previously more complete building (as a façade from Victoria described below); it is a façade built exactly and precisely as a façade. The task of this structure – broad enough only to accommodate an appropriate company of the ruler's attendants – was to serve as a stage for the ruling power. Situated in the main square of Leon in northern Spain, its breadth equal to the tower visible at its right end, richly ornamented with balconies, insignia and a proud portal, it served as a platform for public appearances of the rulers of Castile. The whole "practicality" of this structure consists in the doubling of its performative function through providing a "pedestal" and a stage for the rulers to perform their power and superiority.

### Sincere façades

We have noted that the illusory and rhetorical nature of the façade – its specific “insincerity” as a “face of a building” – is eventually justified by the cultural conventions of reading architectonic texts. Still, there are façades which do not need this kind of justification and return to their etymological roots. These are cases when the façade overcomes its inherently deceitful character and becomes equal with the face.

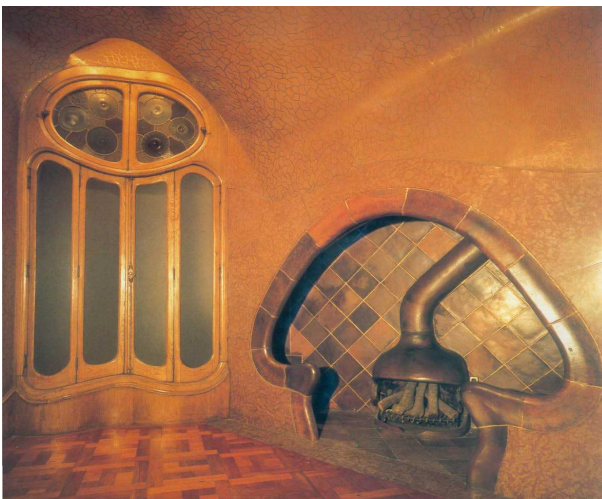
The first and perhaps the most striking example of this overcoming of the natural (or naturalized) “falsity” of the façade can be found in the architectural idea of Antoni Gaudí. Gaudí’s façade is not an ornament appended to the main structure of the building, but constitutes its integral part. Gaudí overthrows the opposition between the inside and the outside; the interior

emanates upon the surface of the building and vice versa: the external form of the building, its exterior surface and texture are saturated by the qualities of the interior. What is at stake here is not a material detail of the inside recurring on the outside, but the pervasive and overwhelming presence of one architectonic idea making the façade homogeneous with the whole structure. In this respect, Gaudí’s work embodies the Deleuzian idea of difference not *between* two elements or realms (here: the inside and the outside), but the idea of difference embodied in repetition. The recurrence of a motif, of a curve, a projection of a detail (for example the marine motifs dominating the undulating façade of Casa Milà) can be found permeating the substance and space of the whole building, including such details as the shape of ceilings and tiles on the floor. The same kind of homogeneity can be seen in the subtle curves and the delicate curvilinear network of ornaments in the living room of Casa Batlló and in the curvilinear ceiling embracing the undulating shape of the fireplace together with the wavy and fluid wardrobe door the forms which are then “repeated” in the front wall of the building (Figs 3, 4).

a)



b)



**Fig. 3.** Fragments of the interior of Casa Batlló (a, b)



**Fig. 4.** Casa Batlló

But one could equally well say that the direction is reverse, that it is these exterior forms that project themselves inside to permeate the substance of the whole structure. Such an undecided bi-directionality of aesthetic vectors overcomes the inherent façade-ity of the façade. The exterior surface does no longer attempt to dominate the interior; on the contrary, its aim is to exteriorize the inside and articulate it. In Gaudi's case, the metaphorical phrase "face of the building" takes on a thoroughly and legitimately literal meaning: Gaudi's façades are faces unveiling the interiority of their buildings: through the appeal of the exterior we become immersed into the interior.

In another unusual example the sincerity of the façade is the naked sincerity of a death mask. In the picture below (Fig. 5) we see a modest façade of an already nonexistent building in a small street in Victoria, a town near Vancouver in British Columbia. I do not know the reasons for which it was left standing there – whether as a peculiar memento or simply a kind of spacial sculpture. However, as we can quite clearly see in the picture, it was not left there by coincidence or negligence; on the contrary, it has been supported and reinforced by a carefully designed construction – it has been taken care of and exposed to public view as a death mask.

The façade visible in the photograph does neither hide nor externalize anything. The windows, unveiled by curtains or shutters, communicate a clear message: "The interior does not exist any more." What is exposed is the starkness of nonexistence. We see here a parallel with the *post mortem* face: like a death mask, this façade is only a portal to memory and reflexive recollections.



**Fig. 5.** "Dead" façade in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

The last example I want to give of an honest and sincere façade is even more unusual. The Berlin wall, after the fall of the communist German Democratic republic, became a death mask, but a joyful one – a death mask *a rebours*. For a person looking at the wall from the western side, it had always been – against the intentions of its constructors – a façade of totalitarianism, a façade *a rebours* from the very beginning of its existence: instead of unveiling the interior – hiding it from the world; instead of excess – showing sternness; instead of garrulousness – grey silence. In the memory of the western world, the wall has established itself as a dumb structure not only forbidding dialogue and exchange, but any kind of externalization of the interior of the system separated by it. With the collapse of the system, the wall – for a brief moment – became a dreary death mask, to change very soon into a surface of collective emotionality (see Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6.** Fragment of Berlin Wall

In this dramatic way, deeply rooted in the precariousness of human fate, the façade threw off its inherent insincerity, and became a collective "face," reincarnated and resuscitated to life so that it could express the enthusiasm of the splendid moment.

### The return of lie – metaphor

The instances of the veracity and truthfulness of the façade described above are quite exceptional. The norm, as we have noted, consists in excess and boastfulness. But we have also noted that to give a building a façade – the excessive and boastful mask – is in perfect accord with the performative, rhetorical and aesthetic conventions generally accepted in the western society.

This reliance and recourse to conventions – to semi-otic, discursive and aesthetic systems – eradicates the deceitfulness of the façade in social understanding.

And yet this suppressed deceitfulness returns to the façade in its *metaphorical* sense. Here, our ambivalent attitude to the idea of façade becomes manifest: even though exempted from ethical charges and treasured as an architectonic element, it is still judged negatively and condemned when it returns, after a long semantic detour, to its lexical origin – the face. The understanding forgiveness disappears when façade is put on the face as a mask. The face, by opening the possibility of choice, opens a moral space: one can “save one’s face” from the very start by putting it on full view to the Other and thereby giving access to one’s defenceless interior; or, one can guard the interior by putting on a mask. The face reveals things which one might perhaps want to hide – be it emptiness, lonesomeness, or helplessness; the mask hides the interior and creates appearances. A façade man is someone who continually puts on and changes masks either for the sake of camouflage or in order to fraudulently display the excess which the interior in fact lacks. The duplicitous performativity of a double- or multi-faced person, a hypocrite, finds no understanding in the Western culture and no justification in social conventions. Façade – in its *metaphorical* sense referring to a person and his/her actions – irrevocably carries negative ethical value: it is associated with superficiality, sham, pretence, deception, and hypocrisy.

These two faces (!) of façade rarely come into view simultaneously; they operate rather on the principle of mutual exclusion, or on the principle of figure and background: when we see one, we do not notice the other; when we expound rhetorical splendour we do not perceive falsity. We are presented here, then, with an interesting instance of a cultural operation of the same figure of speech in two radically different ways on the plane of metonymy and on the plane of metaphor. As a metonymical representation of the interior of a building or of its owner, façade is not only socially accepted but also highly appreciated; however, when façade is substituted for genuine personality or honest and sincere behaviour, not on the basis of contiguity (metonymy) but of paradigmatic analogy or similarity (metaphor), the value it carries is unequivocally negative. Whether this discrepancy also tells us something about specific ethical “predispositions” of metonymy and metaphor in general, is a question yet to be explored.

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## VEIDAS IR FASADAS: VIZUALUMO IR ETIŠKUMO ASPEKTAI

W. Kalaga

**Santrauka.** Pasitelkiant tarpkultūrinis pavyzdžius ir semantinės analizės metodą straipsnyje tiriama Veido ir Fasado vaizdinių/sąvokų reikšminis ir etinis aspektai. Ieškoma panašumo tarp abiejų vaizdinių/sąvokų etimologijos ir vizualinio suvokimo struktūrų. Gilinamasi į Veidą ir Fasadą kaip į eksterjero ženklus, simboliniame lygmenyje reprezentuojančius interjerą. Straipsnyje išryškinama, kad tiriamos sąvokos konotuoja skirtingas etines vertes nepaisant dalinio jų tarpusavio panašumo. Veidui priskiriama nuoširdumo ir tikrumo reikšmė. Fasadas (pastato veidas) interpretuojamas kaip interjero simuliakras, todėl siejamas su netikrumu, apgaulingumu.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** veidas, fasadas, kaukė, metonimija, performatyvumas, retoriškumas.

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