

The impassible face: a semiotic genealogy of emotional opacity

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Abstract This article explores the evolution of the impassible face, tracing its transformation from a philosophical ideal of emotional mastery to a cultural pathology of emotional opacity. Beginning with the serene countenance of the Stoic sage, exemplified by Anaxarchus, and the tranquil suffering of the Christian martyr, such as Saint Agatha, it examines how this ideal migrated to the medical profession, becoming a marker of professional composure in Sir William Osler’s *Aequanimitas*. The study then shifts to the concept of alexithymia, where the absence of emotional expression is pathologized, turning the calm face into a sign of emotional disconnection. This tension is further dramatized in Marina Abramović’s *The Artist Is Present*, where the silent, impassible face becomes a mirror of emotional projection. Finally, the article explores the rise of digital faces — filtered, simulated, and mediated — where the ideal of equanimity is transformed into a mask of generalized alexithymia, a state where emotional presence is replaced by spectral opacity.

Keywords: impassible face, emotional opacity, alexithymia, digital simulation, semiotic ideology

“Imperturbability could be depended upon.”
(John Steinbeck 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath*)

0. Introduction

The concept of impassibility, particularly in the context of the human face, is a paradox that captures a fundamental tension within the semiotics of emotional expression. While the adjective “impassible” directly negates “passible”, the latter is scarcely used,¹ and the former dominates our linguistic imagination. This asymmetry is not merely a lexical curiosity but a veiled indication of a cultural and philosophical bias: the valorization of impassibility as an ideal, a normative condition to which the face is expected to aspire. The paradox of impassibility lies in its dual nature. On the one hand, it signifies the absence of reaction, a deliberate or involuntary withholding of emotional response, a stoic calm that defies external provocations. On the other hand, it presupposes the existence of a condition from which one can withhold — that is, the state of being

¹ In Christian theology, a being or entity described as passible is one that is capable of experiencing emotions, pain, and suffering.

passible, of being susceptible to emotional disturbance. The face, as the most expressive part of the body, becomes the privileged site where this dialectic unfolds. It is in the face that the tension between emotional transparency and its calculated suppression is most visible, where the human condition is simultaneously revealed and concealed.

This article seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of facial impassibility, examining it through two main dimensions: the impassibility of the face itself and the broader notion of bodily impassibility. The first focuses on the face as a semiotic surface, where the absence of emotion can be read as a sign, a gesture, a rhetorical posture, or an involuntary condition. The second expands the analysis to the body as a whole, investigating how corporeal impassibility can serve as a performative strategy or a symptom of emotional detachment. The very etymology of the term “impassibility” — rooted in the notion of “*passio*”, of suffering, feeling, and emotion — paradoxically implies that even the absence of visible emotion is haunted by the potential for passion. In addressing these themes, this study will not merely catalog examples of impassibility but will interrogate its semiotic, philosophical, and psychological implications, revealing how this concept intersects with broader questions of identity, authenticity, and the mediation of emotion in both traditional and digital contexts.

1. The Impassibility of Philosophers

As it has been indicated in the previous section, the concept of impassibility, particularly in the context of the human face, reflects a fundamental tension in the semiotics of emotional expression. The term “impassible” negates “passible,” a word that rarely appears in use. This asymmetry reveals more than a linguistic preference; it uncovers a cultural and philosophical inclination toward the valorization of self-control, composure, and emotional restraint.

Domenico Fiasella’s² painting *Impassibility of Anaxarchus* (c. 1630-1635), housed in the Musei di Strada Nuova, Palazzo Bianco, in Genoa, presents a complex and meticulously composed scene (Fig. 1). At the center stands Anaxarchus, a figure of serene composure. His right hand holds a libra — a scale — while his left hand touches his temple, a gesture that suggests contemplation. He is dressed in sober garments, his expression calm, his face marked by an almost sculptural stillness.

² Domenico Fiasella, (Sarzana, 12 August 1589 – Genoa, 19 October 1669).



Fig. 1: Domenico Fiasella, known as “Il Sarzana” (Sarzana, 1589 – Genoa, 1669). 1630–1635. *Impassibility of Anaxarchus (Mediis tranquillus in undis)*. Oil on canvas, 153 x 189 cm. Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Bianco, inv. PB 1385³

Around Anaxarchus, a storm of emotions erupts. Figures to his right and left are seized by dynamic, agitated gestures, their bodies alerted by enhanced vigilance. In the lower foreground, chaos intensifies — a horse bolts through a panicked crowd, bodies lie sprawled on the ground, and lightning cleaves the dark sky above the city. The vivid, almost garish colors of their robes clash sharply with the philosopher’s muted tones. Even more striking is the figure of the king opposite Anaxarchus, his finger raised in fury, while the rich carpet beneath his feet seems to ripple with the same rage that, as we shall see, will engulf the philosopher. In the background, a tempestuous Aeolus unleashes fierce winds, heightening the sense of disorder. The turbulent sky and howling gales evoke a world consumed by passions and uncertainties, yet Anaxarchus remains unmoved — an island of serenity amid the tempest, his unwavering composure an anchor against the surrounding chaos.

The raised index finger of Anaxarchus, pointed toward his temple, subtly reinforces the theme of rational control. His stillness is not merely physical but intellectual. Even the scale he holds, a symbol of balance and judgment, is positioned with deliberate precision, suggesting a measured approach to all things. The entire scene is a study in contrast — passion and reason, chaos and calm, the colorful and the austere — each element meticulously placed to amplify the central figure’s impassibility.

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The painting is further enriched by a Latin motto often associated with the figure of Anaxarchus: “*Mediis tranquillus in undis*” (“calm amidst the waves”). This phrase captures the philosophical essence of the scene, transforming Anaxarchus into a visual emblem of resilience, a figure who, amid the storm of human passions, retains an unwavering serenity.

To fully grasp this image, however, we must turn to the philosophical principles that underpin it. Anaxarchus,⁴ a disciple of Democritus and a precursor to Pyrrhonian skepticism, grounded his notion of eudaimonia (εὐδαιμονία), true well-being, in the principle of adiaphora (ἀδιάφορα). “Eudaimonia”, derived from εὖ (“well”) and δαίμων (“spirit”), denotes a state of flourishing achieved through inner tranquility and wisdom. “Adiaphora”, from ἀ- (“not”) and διάφορος (“differentiated”), signifies an indifference to external circumstances, viewing them as neither inherently good nor bad. For Anaxarchus, happiness was not a product of possessions or public esteem but a state of calm resilience within.

His legendary encounter with Nicocreon,⁵ tyrant of Cyprus, as recounted by Diogenes Laërtius⁶ (*Lives*,⁷ IX, 59)⁸ exemplifies this philosophy. Confronted with threats of torture, Anaxarchus reportedly maintained his composure, declaring, “Pound the sack of Anaxarchus, but you do not touch Anaxarchus himself”.⁹ This is more than a dramatic anecdote; it is a radical assertion of philosophical autonomy, a declaration that the true self, anchored in reason, is invulnerable to external violence.

Fiasella’s painting captures this doctrine of philosophical fortitude, where the libra in Anaxarchus’s hand becomes an emblem of balanced judgment, a visual affirmation of his indifference to external conditions (adiaphora). Created in the early seventeenth century, a time marked by renewed interest in Stoic and skeptical philosophies, the painting can be interpreted as a statement on the ideal of unwavering self-mastery — an image of intellectual and moral resilience at the dawn of modernity, where the face of the philosopher is the mirror of his soul’s steadfast calm.

2. The Impassibility of Laymen

The theme of impassibility, as depicted in Domenico Fiasella’s painting, is dramatically reimaged in Otto van Veen’s¹⁰ *Emblemata Horatiana* (1684), a richly illustrated emblem book published in Amsterdam (“apud Henricum Wetstenium”). This work combines elaborate engravings with moralizing verses in four languages — Latin, German, French, and Dutch — transforming classical philosophy into vivid, didactic imagery. Each emblem pairs a carefully composed image with explanatory texts, primarily drawn from Horace, which van Veen adapts to his ethical purpose. Designed as a manual of moral philosophy, the volume explores classical virtues and the steadfastness of the wise man who remains unmoved by external chaos. Its detailed engravings convey dramatic scenes that invite contemplation, while the multilingual verses offer a range of perspectives, making the work accessible to a broad European audience. As a cultural

⁴ Ancient Greek Ἀνάξαρχος (Anáxarchos); born around 380 BCE in Abdera, Thrace; death around 320 BCE.

⁵ Nicocreon (Greek Νικοκρέων; lived 4th century BC) was king of Salamis in Cyprus, at the time of Alexander the Great’s (336-323 BC) expedition against Persia.

⁶ He probably lived in the 3rd century AD.

⁷ Ancient Greek: Βίοι καὶ γνῶμαι τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ εὐδοκίμησάντων; Latin: *Vitae Philosophorum*.

⁸ Subsequently reported also by Cicero (*Tusculanae Disputationes*, II, 22; *De natura deorum* 3, 33, 82) and Valerius Maximus (*Facta et dicta memorabilia* 3, 3 ext. 4).

⁹ “πίτισσε τὸν Ἀναξάρχου θύλακον, Ἀναξάρχον δὲ οὐ πίτισσε”.

¹⁰ Leiden, 1556 – Brussels, May 6, 1629.

artifact of the late 17th century, *Emblemata Horatiana* reflects the intersection of classical philosophy, Christian ethics, and Baroque aesthetics. Its blend of text and image exemplifies the Baroque principle of *ut pictura poesis* — a harmony between visual and textual expression.

In emblem 32, which adapts Fiasella's painting, the figure of Anaxarchus appears seated, holding a scale while a storm of chaos swirls around him (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Otto van Veen (1684) *Emblemata Horatiana*, Amsterdam, apud Henricum Wetstenium: 63.

To his right, tumultuous flames devour a city, and a fierce wind lashes the sky with ferocious gusts. The king, standing on a pedestal, gestures violently, while a group of agitated figures surround the philosopher, their faces contorted with fear and anguish. Amidst this tempest of passions and destruction, Anaxarchus remains an island of serene composure, his face calm, his body unmoved. The motto that the image depicts, *Mediis tranquillus in undis* (“calm amidst the waves”), reinforces the theme of unshakable serenity, transforming the image into a visual testament to the virtue of impassibility.

The accompanying verses in Latin, German, and French amplify this message, celebrating the unwavering serenity of the sage:

Latin:

Iustum et tenacem propositi virum,
Lib. 3,
Non civium ardor prava iubentium,
Od. i.
Non vultus instantis tyranni,
Mente quatit solida; neque Auster,
Dux inquieti turbidus Hadriane,
Nec fulminantis magna manus Iovis:
Si fractus illabatur orbis,
Impavidum ferient ruinae.

English Translation:

The just man, firm in his resolve,
Cannot be shaken by the maddening crowd,
Nor by the threatening face of a tyrant,
Nor by the fierce south wind, commander of the stormy Adriatic,
Nor by the mighty hand of thunderous Jove.
Should the shattered world crash down upon him,
Its ruins will strike him unafraid.

Commentary:

Sicuti Socratis commune adagium, ut statuem in sua base, firmam.
Ita virtuti ac bono proposito nixum, immotum clie.
Just as the common saying of Socrates, like a statue on its base, firm.
So too, one who is anchored in virtue and good purpose remains immovable.

German:

Der Weise bleibt unbeweglich.
Der Weisen keine Furcht, noch Not, noch Tod verletzt,
Kein Aufruhr, Glut, noch Sturm ihn in das Bußgüst setzt!
Er bleibt in einem Turm, und unbeweglich stehen,
Auch wenn unter ihm die Wellen gegen die Klippen schlagen.

English Translation:

The wise one remains unmoved.
Neither fear, nor distress, nor death can harm the sage,
No revolt, no flames, nor storm can force him into remorse.
He stands in a tower, steadfast,
Even as waves crash against the cliffs below.

French:

Le Sage est inébranlable.
Le sage, grand comme les Dieux,
Est maître de ses destinées ;
Et de la fortune, des cieux,
Tient les puissances enchaînées.
Il règne absolument sur la terre et sur l'onde,
Il commande aux tyrans, il commande au hasard :
Et s'il voyait périr le Monde,
Le Monde, en s'écroulant, ne l'étonnerait pas.

English Translation:

The sage is unshakable.

Great like the gods, the sage
Is master of his own destiny;
He holds the powers of fortune and the heavens in chains.
He reigns absolutely over earth and sea,
He commands tyrants, he commands chance;
And if he saw the world perish,
Its collapse would not disturb him.

The emblem is further elaborated through verses in Dutch, which articulate the ideal of unwavering serenity:

De oprechte is zonder vrees.
De oprechte, met zijn ziel in vrede,
Let niet op storm noch bliksemstralen,
Maar blijft altijd als een stille zee,
Of als een balans met juiste schalen.
Hoewel tirannie haar moedwil toont,
En zelfs de hoogste torens beven,
Laat hij het rumoer zijn gang gaan,
Vertrouwend op zijn onschuldige leven.

English Translation:

The righteous one is without fear.
The righteous one, with his soul in peace,
Cares neither for storm nor lightning's glare,
But remains ever like a tranquil sea,
Or a balance with perfectly even scales.
Though tyranny displays its reckless pride,
And though the highest towers may tremble,
He lets the tumult rage as it will,
Serene in his innocent life. (Van Veen 1684: 64)

These verses reinforce the philosophical message of the emblem: the true sage is not merely one who resists adversity but one who is internally untouched by it. The metaphor of the “tranquil sea” and the “perfectly balanced scales” visually and conceptually echo the figure of Anaxarchus, whose serenity is not a passive endurance but an active mastery over the self. Even when confronted by the arrogance of tyranny or the chaos of the external world, the righteous one remains unshaken, secure in his own virtue.

The contrast between the serene face of the philosopher and the distorted features of the tyrant is central to both Fiasella's painting and Van Veen's *Emblemata Horatiana*. Yet these works do more than merely depict the philosopher's impassibility; they offer it as a model for the ruling elite of their time. In seventeenth-century Europe, from the mercantile republic of Genoa to the thriving Dutch Republic, a new bourgeois class was rising — one tasked with navigating the turbulence of an ever-changing world. For this emerging elite, the figure of the impassible philosopher represented an ideal: a disciplined body and a composed face, free from the distortions of passion. Such calm was more than a private virtue; it became a public necessity, a mark of authority and self-mastery. But beyond mere control, these images celebrate equanimity — a balanced disposition that neither overreacts to adversity nor is seduced by success. It is this profound serenity, both personal and political, that defines the true sage.

3. The Impassibility of Physicians

This ideal of equanimity, understood as composure in the face of events, shifts from the sovereign inspired by classical philosophy to the bourgeois profession, particularly medicine. A seminal example of this transition is found in the essay *Aequanimitas* by Sir William Osler,¹¹ delivered in 1889 as a valedictory address at the University of Pennsylvania. Osler, regarded as one of the fathers of modern medicine, urged young physicians to cultivate two essential qualities: imperturbability — calm and clear judgment in moments of crisis — and equanimity, a balanced disposition of mind, unaffected by emotion or indifference. In this context, the physician’s equanimity is not mere emotional detachment but a form of self-control that provides reassurance to the patient. Confronted with suffering, the physician must maintain a stable, composed presence, embodying a model of self-mastery and serenity. This attitude reflects the bourgeois ideal of a *corps maîtrisé* and an impassible face, capable of facing the world’s turmoil with composure. The evolution of equanimity from the political to the medical sphere reveals how the virtue of impassibility was reinterpreted to meet the expectations of an emerging bourgeois society, becoming a guiding principle not only for rulers but also for professionals called to face the challenges of the modern world with balance and discernment.

Sir William Osler defines imperturbability as an essential quality for physicians, one that transcends technical skill and embodies a profound mastery over the self:

In the first place, in the physician or surgeon no quality takes rank with imperturbability, and I propose for a few minutes to direct your attention to this essential bodily virtue. Perhaps I may be able to give those of you, in whom it has not developed during the critical scenes of the past month, a hint or two of its importance, possibly a suggestion for its attainment. Imperturbability means coolness and presence of mind under all circumstances, calmness amid storm, clearness of judgment in moments of grave peril, immobility, impassiveness, or, to use an old and expressive word, phlegm. It is the quality which is most appreciated by the laity though often misunderstood by them; and the physician who has the misfortune to be without it, who betrays indecision and worry, and who shows that he is flustered and flurried in ordinary emergencies, loses rapidly the confidence of his patients (Osler 1889: 3–4).

For Osler, imperturbability is not just an inner quality but an “essential bodily virtue” that must be visibly expressed. The reference to “phlegm” — a term rooted in classical humoral theory, signifying a calm and resilient temperament — highlights how deeply this ideal connects to both ancient philosophy and medical ethics. The physician’s composed demeanor is not merely personal discipline; it serves a social function by fostering patient trust. Any display of “indecision and worry” not only betrays professional inadequacy but also erodes confidence, revealing how crucial it is for the physician’s face and body to project an image of unwavering serenity. This vision of imperturbability aligns with the broader ideal of equanimity but emphasizes its outward manifestation. In the medical context, inner composure must translate into a calm, authoritative presence, with the physician’s face serving as a mirror of self-mastery — a visible marker of wisdom and professional integrity.

The ideal of imperturbability has undergone a remarkable transformation across centuries, evolving from the serene composure of the ancient philosopher to the unwavering faith of the Christian martyr, and finally to the disciplined demeanor of the modern professional. At each stage, this ideal adapts to the values and expectations of a

¹¹ Bond Head, Canada, 12 July 1849 – Oxford, 29 December 1919.

changing world, yet its core remains the same: the capacity to maintain calm and self-mastery in the face of suffering. A striking example of this transition appears in Edward F. Lewison's¹² article on Saint Agatha in the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* (1950). Lewison, a founder and chief of the breast clinic at The Johns Hopkins Hospital, begins by quoting Sir William Osler, who observed that “in the continual remembrance of a glorious past, individuals and nations find their noblest inspiration.” This reference to the past is not merely a rhetorical flourish; it highlights how the ancient ideal of equanimity persists, reinterpreted in the figure of Saint Agatha. As the patron saint of diseases of the breast, Agatha embodies a form of serene endurance that echoes the impassibility of the Stoic philosopher. Tortured and mutilated for her faith, she remained calm, her face unmarked by agony, her spirit unwavering.

In Agatha, the virtue of impassibility is Christianized. No longer merely a philosophical mastery over the self, it becomes a spiritual fortitude — a serene acceptance of suffering as a path to salvation. Yet even in this religious context, the fundamental image of the calm, untroubled face remains, a visible mark of an invisible strength. This legacy would eventually shape the ideal of the modern physician, as described by Sir William Osler in his famous address *Aequanimitas*. Here, the impassibility of the saint is secularized, becoming a professional virtue. The physician must maintain a composed demeanor, a calm presence in the face of suffering — not only as a sign of personal mastery, but as a form of care itself. The serene face of the physician, like that of the saint, reassures and consoles, transforming an ancient ideal into a social necessity.

4. The Impassibility of Language

The ideal of the impassible face and the composed body is rooted in a tradition far older than the Stoic ethic of self-mastery or the heroic figure of the Christian martyr. As Ugo Volli explains in *Figure del desiderio* [“figures of desire”] (2002), this ideal emerges from a Parmenidean metaphysics, where mobility — whether of the face or the body — reveals the presence of desire. Desire is a movement toward absence, a longing for what is not, an attempt to bring into being what is excluded from reality. The restless face and the agitated body become signs of this condition, marked by want, by a yearning for transformation, by a belief in the possibility of change.

Within this framework, the calm face and the still body are more than mere symbols of inner peace; they express a profound philosophical stance. They embody a commitment to being over becoming, rejecting the illusions of desire for a stable, immutable reality. For the Stoic sage, the Christian martyr, and even the modern physician, impassibility is a virtue of character as well as a metaphysical position, an assertion of presence over absence, of reality over appearance. The composed face becomes the mirror of an unshaken self, a mask that signifies liberation from the illusions of desire.

The contrast between the restless, expressive face and the serene, impassible countenance can be traced not only to philosophical or metaphysical traditions but also to a fundamental experience of human existence — language itself. In his analysis of Augustine's *Confessions* (1.6.8), Sebastiano Vecchio explores the frustration of the infant who wishes to express his desires but cannot (Vecchio 2009). The infant's gestures and cries, attempts to manifest inner feelings, are destined to fail, marked by what Vecchio calls a “frustrated iconism”. The child, locked within the inarticulate immediacy of his own desires, confronts the insurmountable barrier between interiority and expression. His face, contorted with effort, becomes a surface of visible struggle, a site of restless attempts to bridge the gap between the self and the world.

¹² Chicago, IL, 1913 – Baltimore, MD, January 28, 2008.

This image of the infant's expressive frustration provides a poignant counterpoint to the ideal of the impassible face. Where the infant's face is a mirror of need, shaped by the impossibility of perfect communication, the face of the sage, the martyr, or the physician is a mirror of self-sufficiency. It is the mask of a being that has overcome the anxiety of expression, which does not cry out because it lacks nothing, which does not signal because it is complete in itself. The impassible face is not just a symbol of inner calm; it is the visible sign of an interiority that no longer seeks outward validation, a self that does not need to be seen or heard to be fulfilled.

The infant's frustrated attempts at expression reveal a fundamental truth about human existence: we are beings of desire — creatures who seek, who need, who strive to make ourselves known. Our gestures and cries, our first tentative signs, are all attempts to bridge the gap between inner feeling and outer expression. Yet the impassible face, the serene, untroubled countenance, offers a radical alternative. It represents the possibility of a self that stands beyond desire, a being so complete that it has no need to communicate, no compulsion to be seen or understood. This is not merely the absence of expression; it is an anti-language — a face that communicates precisely by withholding, a presence that affirms itself through silence.

In this light, the impassible face is more than a symbol of inner calm or moral strength; it is a philosophical position, a declaration of ontological sufficiency. It embodies a state of being that transcends the restless urge to express, the endless grasping at symbols, and instead asserts a serene, unwavering presence. This face is not a surface to be read, for it is not written — it is a mirror that reflects nothing, a mask that conceals nothing because it has nothing to hide. It is the visible sign of an interiority so complete that it neither reveals nor seeks revelation.

5. The Semiotic Ideology of Impassibility

The ideal of the impassible face, which has traversed the domains of ancient philosophy, Christian sanctity, and professional ethics, also finds a distinctive expression in the emerging ethos of modernity, particularly within the context of Protestant thought. In his dedication to Simon Grynaeus in the *Commentary on Romans* (1540), John Calvin¹³ extols the virtue of *lucida brevitatis* — lucid brevity. For Calvin, excellence in exposition is achieved not through expansive rhetoric but through a disciplined economy of words, a distillation of meaning. This preference for conciseness, for a speech stripped of excess, reflects a broader semiotic ideology that would come to characterize Protestant culture: a suspicion of ornament, a valorization of simplicity, a belief that truth must be expressed with a minimum of signs.

But this ethic of restraint is not limited to language; it extends to the face and the body, where expressive minimalism becomes a mark of virtue. The composed face, the measured gesture — these become signs of integrity, wisdom, and self-control. Where the Catholic Baroque delights in the exuberance of gesture, the dramatic play of light and shadow, the Protestant ethic privileges an image of restraint. It is a paradox that the Baroque paintings we have analyzed, which seek to depict the ideal of *aequanimitas*, often do so through a visual language of exaggerated emotion. The philosopher's impassible face is surrounded by a storm of contorted bodies, the martyr's serene countenance is set against a scene of torment. These are images that celebrate calm through chaos, equanimity through contrast. The evolution of the impassible face is thus not merely the history of an ethical ideal but also the history of a semiotic ideology — a shift from the expressive opulence of the Baroque to the reserved clarity of the Protestant

¹³ Noyon, France, 10 July, 1509 – Geneva, 27 May 1564.

Reformation. What begins as a philosophical virtue — mastery over the self — becomes an aesthetic ideal, then a professional obligation, and finally a social norm. The face must communicate as little as possible, just as speech must be reduced to essentials. The physician must show calm, not compassion; the saint must display serenity, not suffering; the philosopher must appear unmoved, even in the midst of debate.

Yet this Protestant ideal of expressive minimalism is not without its contradictions. The Baroque image, even when depicting equanimity, cannot resist the allure of dramatic contrast. The philosopher's calm is amplified by the turbulence around him, the martyr's serenity by the facial cruelty of his tormentors. The very attempt to portray calmness generates a tension between the ideal of stillness and the dynamism of the image. The composed face, in its desire to signify nothing, becomes the focal point of an expressive drama — a mirror of equanimity surrounded by a storm of passion.

6. Pathological Impassibility

The ideal of the impassible face, which has journeyed from ancient philosophy through Christian sanctity to bourgeois professionalism, reveals a paradox when viewed in light of modern psychology. What was once celebrated as a mark of wisdom, sanctity, or professional mastery — equanimity inscribed on the face — finds its pathological double in the phenomenon of reduced affect. The serene, composed countenance that symbolized mastery over the self can become, when taken to an extreme, a mask of emotional absence. In clinical terms, reduced affect is not a mark of wisdom but a symptom, a sign of psychological or neurological dysfunction. Constricted, shallow, blunted, and flat affect — these terms describe various degrees of emotional withdrawal, where the face loses its capacity to mirror inner states. Such conditions are symptomatic of a range of disorders: autism, schizophrenia, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, depersonalization disorder, schizoid personality disorder, or even traumatic brain injury. The face, once a site of symbolic perfection, becomes instead a surface emptied of expression, a mute mirror that no longer reflects the complexity of inner life.

This transformation exposes a deeper tension: the ideal of the impassible face, rooted in a metaphysics of self-sufficiency, is fundamentally at odds with the biological reality of human existence. The frustrated infant, as described by Sebastiano Vecchio in his analysis of Augustine's *Confessions* (Vecchio 2009), struggles to express his desires, his gestures and cries becoming failed attempts to bridge the gap between inner emotion and outer expression. His face, contorted with effort, is a site of desperate communication, a living sign of the body's openness to the world. In this sense, the frustration of the infant is not a mere failure but a reminder of the fundamental permeability of the human face — a surface that reveals, rather than conceals, the drama of the soul. Even the concept of anhedonia, first defined by Théodule-Armand Ribot¹⁴ in 1896 as a diminished capacity to experience pleasure, can be seen as the pathological shadow of ancient equanimity. Anhedonia is not a calm beyond desire but a numbing of the capacity for joy, a disconnection from the vitality of emotion.

This same tension is visible in the history of the medical profession. Sir William Osler's *Aequanimitas*, which extols the virtue of imperturbability in the physician, has increasingly faced criticism. The serene, impassible demeanor of the doctor — once seen as a sign of competence and strength — is now often regarded as a limitation. Patients today do not seek a physician who is merely an unshaken pillar of calm; they look for one who can display empathy, who can show, in some measure, a face that

¹⁴ Guingamp, France, 18 December 1839 – Paris, 9 December 1916.

receives and reflects their suffering. Medicine is no longer just the science of diagnosis and treatment; it is also the art of compassionate presence. In this context, the face of the physician must be more than a mask of composure — it must be a mirror capable of communicating not only knowledge but also care.

Thus, the face that was once an effigy of inner serenity becomes, in its pathological extreme, a surface of emptiness. The journey from the philosopher's calm to the saint's serenity and the physician's composed demeanor finds its shadow in the clinical language of affective deficiency. What was once a virtue of the few can become, in its excess, a disorder for the many. The mask of equanimity, perfected across centuries, risks becoming a mask of emotional disconnection — a stillness not born of wisdom but of suffering.

7. Alexithymia

Such ideal, finds its shadow in alexithymia — a condition where the face loses its power to express and perceive emotion. What once symbolized strength now reveals a pathology: a mask of serenity that hides an emptiness, a surface where emotions cannot appear or be understood. Here, the triumph of equanimity collapses into a sociopathology of affective disconnection. The term alexithymia derives from the Greek ἀ- (*a-*, “without”), λέξις (*lexis*, “word”), and θυμός (*thymos*, “emotion or feeling”), literally meaning “without words for emotions”. This condition, first identified in clinical psychology in the 1970s, designates a personality trait characterized by a marked difficulty in identifying, describing, and understanding one's own emotions. Yet, beyond its clinical definition, alexithymia can be interpreted as a form of semiotic dysfunction, a pathology of expression where the link between inner affect and outward communication is severed. What was once the mark of philosophical equanimity — the impassible face that masters emotion — becomes, in alexithymia, a face emptied of affective meaning, a surface that cannot translate emotion into signs. In a world where the ability to read and express emotions is fundamental to social interaction, alexithymia is not merely a clinical diagnosis but a profound semiotic rupture, a face that fails to speak.

Research by Starita *et al.* (2018) highlights how individuals with high levels of alexithymia exhibit significant difficulties in recognizing static emotional facial expressions (EFE), particularly those associated with fear. The findings indicate that these individuals require a greater intensity of emotional expression to correctly identify emotions, suggesting a threshold problem — a semiotic numbness where emotional cues must be exaggerated to penetrate the perceptual barrier. This condition is not merely a personal deficiency but reveals a broader tension within the semiotics of the face: the threshold at which expression becomes legible. The impassible face, once a model of composure, now emerges as a perceptual problem — a surface from which meaning must be extracted with difficulty, a text in which emotional signs are faint and elusive.

A study by Suslow *et al.* (2021) further elaborates on the impact of alexithymia within the context of clinical depression, where it is associated with deficits in the visual processing of emotional faces. The alexithymic individual not only struggles to express emotion but also to read it, encountering a world of faces that become indecipherable, a theater of masks devoid of meaning. In group settings, this condition exacerbates social isolation, as the alexithymic individual is unable to engage with the subtle, dynamic exchanges of facial expression that define human interaction. What was once the virtue of the impassible face — an ability to remain calm and composed — becomes here a

prison of emotional opacity, a semiotic silence that impedes both understanding and connection.

Nordmann *et al.* (2021) reveal that alexithymic individuals demonstrate reduced facial mimicry, as measured by electromyographic (EMG) responses to emotional faces. This reduction is particularly evident when exposed to adult faces, while child faces still elicit a degree of affective response. This finding highlights a paradox: the face, which in normal conditions serves as a surface of emotional resonance, becomes, for the alexithymic individual, a site of diminished sensitivity. The impassible face, which once symbolized equanimity and self-mastery, now appears as a physiological incapacity, a failure of the very mechanism that allows for affective communication. The alexithymic face is not a mask of serenity but a mirror of disconnection.

Farhoumandi *et al.* (2021) demonstrate that alexithymia is associated with impaired emotional awareness, a condition where even the self is inaccessible, emotions becoming shadows that cannot be named or understood. This incapacity extends to interpersonal relationships, where alexithymic individuals struggle to perceive and appreciate the emotions of others. In this context, the impassible face is not merely a failure of expression but a deeper rupture — a face that cannot read or be read. The semiotic ideology of emotional restraint, celebrated from Stoic philosophy to Protestant ethics, collapses here into an emotional and cognitive void, a surface untouched by affect.

Franz *et al.* (2021) explore how alexithymia manifests in the reduced ability to mimic facial expressions in digital contexts. Here, the impassible face becomes not only a personal condition but a cultural phenomenon. In the world of digital communication, where faces are filtered, flattened, and fragmented into pixels, the semiotic rupture of alexithymia finds a technological echo. The digital face is a face without depth, a screen where emotion is simulated but rarely felt, a site where the semiotic and the affective are severed. The alexithymic condition, once a clinical diagnosis, becomes a mirror of a broader cultural pathology — a world where the face no longer speaks.

8. Withdrawing from Face and Body

In their article “Do People Intend to Gesture?” Emanuela Campisi and Marco Mazzone explore a critical paradox at the heart of human communication: the ambiguous status of gesture as an act suspended between intentionality and automaticity. While traditional theories of communication, following Grice (1957), emphasize that intentionality is the defining feature of meaningful expression, gestures challenge this model. They are bodily movements that accompany speech but do so in a manner that is often spontaneous, fluid, and only partially conscious. Campisi and Mazzone critically examine how psycholinguistics and cognitive science have approached this dual nature of gesture — whether gestures are intentional acts, planned and controlled, or automatic responses that emerge without conscious awareness.

Campisi and Mazzone’s analysis reveals that gestures are best understood not as purely intentional or purely automatic but as existing along a continuum of intentionality. At one extreme are gestures that are fully deliberate, consciously chosen to reinforce or illustrate spoken language — what the authors describe as “strongly intentional gestures”. At the other extreme are those that emerge almost reflexively, without any conscious planning — “weakly intentional gestures”. But between these two poles lies a vast middle ground where gestures are only partially intended, shaped by a dynamic interplay between conscious and unconscious processes. This nuanced model challenges the rigid dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary action, showing that even in the

most automatic gesture, some degree of awareness may be present, while even the most deliberate gesture is shaped by habits and automatisms.

The authors further explore how this continuum of intentionality has significant implications for understanding the face as a site of expression. If gestures, which are bodily movements, can exist in this liminal space between intention and automatism, so too can facial expressions. A smile may be consciously chosen, a frown may arise without awareness, and a look of calm may be a carefully cultivated mask. Yet just as with gestures, the distinction between a deliberate expression and an automatic one is never absolute. The face, like the hand, is a semiotic surface where intentionality and automaticity meet.

This insight has profound implications for understanding alexithymia — a condition where the face, which should be a site of emotional communication, becomes instead a blank surface. In alexithymia, the problem is not merely that the individual cannot express emotion; it is that the connection between feeling and expression is severed. The face, which should be a gesture of the self, becomes an opaque mask. Paradoxically, this emptiness can itself become a performance, a display of absence that invites interpretation. Just as in Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* (2010), where the artist's impassible face becomes a site of dramatic tension, the alexithymic face is a stage — a space where emotions are withheld, but this very withholding becomes a spectacle (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Marina Abramović (2019) *The Artist Is Present*, New York, NY, Museum of Modern Art.

By grounding their analysis of gesture in the continuum of intentionality, Campisi and Mazzone provide a theoretical framework that allows us to understand alexithymia not merely as a pathology but as a semiotic drama. The alexithymic face is a gesture without intention, a performance of silence, a surface that refuses to speak but cannot help being seen. Like the blank face of Abramović, it is a mirror where the viewer's desire for meaning is reflected and frustrated.

9. Conclusions: a generalized uncanniness?

The digital delegation of the face to increasingly sophisticated simulacra introduces a paradox: while these digital faces offer an illusion of presence, they also impose a barrier — both physical and metaphorical — between the face and its interpersonal inscription (Leone 2024). The screen is a dual surface: it exposes and protects, a transparent veil that simultaneously reveals and conceals. As we move from the heroic impassibility of Anaxarchus and the stoic face of the modern physician to the uncanny stillness of MetaHumans,¹⁵ a new game of emotional opacity emerges in the digital arena. This is not just a game of representation; it is a game of poker, where the stakes are the authenticity of our expressions and the transparency of our emotions.

In the digital age, the face has become a contested space, a battleground between presence and absence. This paradoxical condition is explored in the uncanny effect of hyper-realistic digital faces, where every pore is visible, every wrinkle carefully crafted, and yet an intangible sense of artificiality pervades. As Gianmarco Thierry Giuliana has shown (2022), these digital faces, produced through MetaHuman Creator, are not merely visual surfaces but complex semiotic objects, designed to deceive by simulating a sense of authenticity while remaining fundamentally synthetic. The human instinct to read faces — a cognitive habit that defines social interaction — encounters a crisis when these faces appear too perfect, too controlled, yet ultimately empty. This is the specter of a generalized uncanny valley, where not only artificial faces but even flesh-and-blood faces begin to seem veiled by a sheen of unreality.

This ambiguity is exacerbated in a world where generative AI and digital mediation proliferate. During the pandemic, masks physically concealed faces, but today, the masks are digital. Social interactions are increasingly filtered through screens, while AI-driven avatars and digitally manipulated faces simulate expressions that once signaled genuine emotional states. In this context, the ancient ideal of equanimity has not only been democratized—it has been weaponized. The impassible face of Anaxarchus, once a symbol of philosophical mastery, becomes a mask of emotional indifference. The physician's composed face, once a sign of professional integrity, becomes a screen of disconnection. In the digital agora, faces no longer reveal; they obscure. And in this spectral game of mirrored gazes, the question emerges: can we still recognize ourselves as human? If all faces become digital masks, will we lose the ability to discern the truth of presence beneath the surface?

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¹⁵ Highly realistic, customizable 3D digital human avatars created using Unreal Engine's MetaHuman Creator, a cutting-edge tool developed by Epic Games.

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