

**Mary Ann Doane**

**"The Face In Early Cinema And The Discourse Of The Universal This"**

**ABSTRACT**

paper is an analysis of the way in which the face has been viewed as a medium that erases itself as medium, producing a universal legibility. The idea of a "universal language" has been associated with the cinema as a whole, particularly the silent cinema, but the close-up of the face has been exceptionally privileged as transparent and accessible, easily and naturally readable. Here, we are dealing with a global scale—the idea of a universal language buttressed the claims of American cinema to be democratic, global, accessible to all. The concept has a very long history but took a quite specific form in the early years of the 20th century. I will argue that through its alliance with the discourses of physiology, phrenology and colonialism it was inextricably linked to the confrontation with otherness and difference. Works of physiognomy, physiology and phrenology (Lavater, Camper, Galton, Duchenne and others) supported the notion that the facial expressions of actors in the silent cinema were universally readable. At the moment when the world emerged as a globe and colonialism forced a confrontation with unfamiliar differences, physiognomy presented itself as a hermeneutic system that could allay fear of the unknown. Furthermore, it is not accidental that a privileging of the face (or the advocacy of a universal language that often accompanies it) is coincident with a claim of transparency, a denial of mediation. Face-to-face contact as immediacy, presence and transparency represents the lost utopia, the fantasy of pure community before the "Babel-like" fall into the accelerated mediation of new technologies of representation and communication.

**BIO**

Mary Ann Doane is Class of 1937 Professor of Film and Media at The University of California-Berkeley. She is the author of *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (2002), *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991), and *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (1987). In 2007, she edited a special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign." In addition, she has published a wide range of articles on feminist film theory, sound in the cinema, psychoanalytic theory, television, and sexual and racial difference in film. She is currently completing a book on the use of the close-up in film practice and theory, and the way in which screen size and its corresponding scale have figured in the negotiation of the human body's relation to space in modernity.