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EYES WITHOUT a Face

POETRY AND PERDITION

Steve Kronenberg

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lood, butchery, beauty. All three collide and coalesce in director Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* (1960). It's a film that slashes and soothes, blending terror, tenderness, and tragedy. Franju sought to convey a mood of disquieting anguish, and enlisted the writing team of Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac (whose novels were adapted for 1955's *Les diaboliques* and 1958's *Vertigo*) to craft a censor-proof adaptation of Jean Redon's notoriously lurid source novel. The result is a meticulously rendered exercise in edge-of-the-seat angst.



Those Eyes, That Face: Édith Scob captures her character's tenderness and tragedy in *Eyes Without a Face*

Renowned plastic surgeon Dr. Génessier (Pierre Brasseur) causes a catastrophic automobile crash that hideously disfigures his young daughter Christiane (Édith Scob). The girl's deformity is concealed beneath a waxen, expressionless mask. Consumed with guilt (and his own selfish desire to perfect facial transplant surgery), Génessier and his aide/accomplice Louise (Alida Valli) abduct young women, one of whom will unwillingly provide the gift of graft for Christiane's shattered face.

Since its controversial release, *Eyes* has been consistently relegated to the horror genre, largely due to its meld of masks, madness, and medical experimentation. But Franju's focus on murder, deception, hubris, and the fragility of identity also fits into noir's darkest corners. *Eyes* is threaded with anxiety, tightly wrapped in a cloud of cold dread. Its impassive style recalls Hitchcock and Clouzot, but Franju distinguished himself from his French compatriot. "The trouble with Clouzot is that he tries to knock the audience's head off," Franju declared. "That's wrong; you should twist it off."

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Brasseur's brooding portrayal of Génessier is a mix of melancholy and malignancy. Playing an amoral man obsessed with personal and professional redemption, he strides through the film with a quiet determination. Génessier is a murderer, but he's no B-movie mad doctor. Just when he seems most repellent, he evokes our sympathy as he turns tearfully to Christiane and tells her: "You'll have a real face. I promise you." It's a pledge he intends to honor—for his daughter and for himself. Power and remorse both seize his soul. Like many noir antagonists, Génessier is precariously perched between sin and salvation.

The eyes that open *Eyes Without a Face* belong to Alida Valli's Louise. As the film begins, the predatory *femme* is staring back at us through the windshield of her car, preparing to dump a corpse along a dark, desolate road (Maurice Jarre's discordant musical score amplifies the suspense and will serve as Louise's leitmotif). Grateful to Génessier for repairing her own disfigured face, Louise coldly lures the doctor's innocent victims to certain death. Her blind devotion to Génessier is matched only



Left: The famous (infamous?) “heterograft” scene in *Eyes Without a Face*; **Right:** Pierre Brasseur’s Génessier dispatches a terrified victim

by her love for Christiane, whom she cradles in her arms, repeatedly drying her tears and promising her a new face and a new life. Aida Valli’s ability to balance frost and fire served her well in *The Third Man* (1949). In *Eyes Without a Face*, she tempers her chilly demeanor with compassion and kindness. It is quite a disarmingly textured performance.

Brasseur and Valli deliver bravura work, but the picture’s pulse is provided by Édith Scob, as Christiane. “I don’t dare look at myself,” she tells Louise. “I wish I were blind. Or dead.” Her face hidden by a porcelain mask, the actress uses only her eyes to display a remarkable range of emotions: tenderness when petting a beloved dog; empathy as she strokes the feathers of a caged dove; sadness when she sees her ruined face in a mirror; steely anger when she discovers the atrocities committed by her father. Garbed in white, Scob glides through the film’s enormous sets with a bizarre, balletic grace. Christiane’s loneliness is lined with lyricism, but the film grows steadily darker as the lack of a face erodes her sense of self. Psychically drained and trapped inside her home, escape and revenge become more essential than a new face. “Wearing a mask all day long makes you a thing with no expression,” Scob recalled. “I was isolated in my corner. I couldn’t eat with everyone else. I was completely on my own and that served me well for playing the role.”

If Scob gives *Eyes* its heart, the film’s soul lies in the cinematography of veteran cameraman Eugen Schüfftan. Franju’s detached, dissolute vision literally comes to life under Schüfftan’s unerring eye. Exteriors are lensed in a gauzy, misty haze, while interiors blend deep blacks, blinding whites, and charcoal grays. Angles and shadows conjoin with near-geometric precision. *Eyes*’ most unnerving moments occur during the film’s notorious “heterograft” sequence, as we watch Génessier surgically remove the face of an abducted victim. The scene is both excruciating and fascinating. The camera closes in on the procedure, and we suddenly morph from movie watchers in armchairs to medical students in a surgical amphitheater. Schüfftan’s

shots are unflinching, as cold and sharp as Génessier’s scalpel. Our gaze is drawn to the gleam of the instruments, the trickles of blood on milky-white skin, the exactitude of Génessier’s hand, the delicate removal of the facial tissue. The entire sequence is played out in a frigid silence. Rarely has noir been so disturbingly dispassionate.

Franju’s ardor for cinema developed long before *Eyes Without a Face*. Along with film historian Henri Langlois, Franju co-founded the legendary *Cinémathèque Française*, an extensive archive devoted to preserving and exhibiting the art and artifacts of international cinema. His clinical directorial style was honed with the 1949 documentary *Blood of the Beasts* (*Le Sang des bêtes*), an unsparing exploration of Paris’ slaughterhouses. Unfortunately, Franju’s reputation couldn’t save him from the critical maelstrom that greeted *Eyes Without a Face*. Reviewers looked past his virtuosity and saw only depravity. Audiences stayed away in droves. When the movie was shown at the 1960 Edinburgh Film Festival, seven attendees reportedly fainted (Franju sardonically commenting, “Now I know why Scotsmen wear skirts.”) For its 1962 U.S. release, the film was insensitively cropped, inexplicably retitled (*The Horror Chamber of Dr. Faustus*), and inexcusably consigned to the lower half of a drive-in double bill¹. Like Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom*, *Eyes Without a Face* was simply too bold and bizarre for the early 1960s. Time and taste eventually redeemed it. Serge Daney, former editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, called *Eyes* a “marvel.” Film critic J. Hoberman declared it “a masterpiece of poetic horror and tasteful, tactile brutality.” Directors as diverse as John Woo, Pedro Almodovar, and David Cronenberg have cited Franju’s inspiration and influence. If you can look past its queasy, sanguinary moments, *Eyes Without a Face* is an elegiac stew of dread, despair, and dissolution, a film steeped in the spirit and sensibility of film noir. ■

¹ Another film with a disfigured and masked protagonist, *The Face Behind the Mask* (1941), starring Peter Lorre, is also regarded as “horror,” although its essential elements also qualify it as noir.