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Thompson, Peter Gage (1980) *Margaret Thatcher : a new illusion*. *Perception*. pp. 483-484. ISSN 0301-0066

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Margaret Thatcher: a new illusion

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Received 27 May 1980

Köhler (1940) has expressed the belief that upside-down faces are hard to recognise because of the loss of facial expression in such faces. Ellis (1975), reviewing the whole subject of face recognition, reports that the eyes and mouth convey most information about an individual's mood and it is these areas "which can assist us in comprehending what they are trying to communicate to us".

From these reports it seems possible that an inverted face in which the eyes and mouth remain the normal way round might preserve the facial expression better than a truly inverted face. Such a pair of faces is shown in figure 1. Although it is clear that one face in figure 1 has the eyes and mouth rotated to a normal orientation, readers will notice that such a transformation makes little difference to Mrs Thatcher's expression. However, figure 2, which can be viewed by rotating the page through 180°, reveals that we have been cruelly deceived by the smiling Mrs Thatcher of figure 1; her two faces now are dramatically different. Returning to figure 1 it is still very difficult to perceive the eyes-and-mouth-rotated version as we now know it to be.

Further research into this illusion might help determine whether face recognition is a serial or a parallel process, is achieved by face-specific analysers searching for distinguishing characteristics or by some perceptual gestalt. It might even tell us something about Margaret Thatcher.

Figure 2.



Figure 1.

Acknowledgements. I thank the York Conservative Association for supplying the stimulus material.

References

- Ellis H D, 1975 "Recognising faces" *British Journal of Psychology* 66 409-426
Köhler W, 1940 *Dynamics in Psychology* (New York: Liveright) p 60