

# Fixing Being with Likeness: Facial Recognition as the Stage for Global Per-Formance

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**Abstract** This contribution uses a phenomenological and psychoanalytic framework to rethink the porous boundaries between *being* and *likeness*. I move from a Surrealist advertising pamphlet produced in 1919 to the facial surgery techniques of 2018, contextualizing theories of the dyadic relationship between text and reader (Iser) with practices of image-solicitation and digital intimacy on the Internet. In unpacking self-surveillance techniques and state-run biometric technologies, this paper examines how our use of faces informs the ways our faces are used against us. Through analyzing how the performance of fantasy and the realization of authorship are imbricated through images of humankind, I research new developments in Augmented Reality avatars, linking the language of the face (Lévinas) as a staging ground for potential empathy and conversely, systematic exclusion. In tracing the data double while looking at the biopolitical function of social media, this paper considers how our images of humankind fix our embodied nature while fixing others in place.

**Keywords** facial recognition | digital intimacy | Internet studies | algorithmic governance | migration | surrealism





Day by day the new interests and activities of modern life are prolonging the youth of our souls, and day by day we are becoming more aware of the necessity for our faces to express that youthfulness [...]

Mina Loy, *Auto-Facial Construction*

## Introduction

What does it mean to exercise or exorcise the face? In its pursuit of a “fitting esthetic revelation” (Loy, 52: 2018), *Auto-Facial Construction*, an advertising pamphlet produced by Mina Loy in 1919, provides a useful entry point into a larger discussion of the social imaginary premised upon self-image and its intersection with technology, the endeavor to both converge and confer face and personality, body and essence. At stake in its author’s increasingly pictorialized world of the twentieth-century is self-determination and self-alienation, and the ever-present negotiation between being and becoming. We read the face, in the Lévinas sense, so as to be invited to a relation (2007: 198). But today the face also reads us, and to be read always also means to be written, to be formed in one’s image but also to correspond to a likeness that belongs to a normative value. In this and all scenarios, we should remember that we don’t have a face so much as slide into one; it is because the face is not universal that our cultural apparatus, what Félix Deleuze and Gilles Guattari call “the abstract machine of faciality” (1987: 177), always assumes a selective response based on conformity and the celebration of a specific ideal. In this way the face assembles and is also assembled by structures of power; the face is both a language and a politics articulated as such.

By rethinking the relationship of facial-recognition—in other words, by re-positioning the face, not as the fleshy fact which forms the self but as the blanket visage upon which all intentions and determination can be continually superimposed—we can better understand how our use of faces informs how our faces are used against us. In this way, fantasy and fabrication re-member themselves as physical forms, a touching allegory for today’s Post Internet culture grounded in both self-surveillance and state-run biometric technologies, in which faces are first rendered as data before their conversion into both currency and keycard, granting access or forbidding persons to pass.

What does the *mise-en-scène* of personification and impersonation offer to viewers when mediated through the Internet and its economy of images? Loy’s advertising pamphlet of 1919 should also be put into context with the Surrealism movement to which she belonged. Surrealism, more so than any prior literary revolution, harnessed the imagination and the image while imploring each of their ruptures, an opening-up and unfolding so as to will one’s interior desires into the external world. For the



Surrealists, prediction or performance became the first step toward production,<sup>1</sup> the abstract turned into actuality; in the aim and emblem of collective emancipation, the personal necessarily became political, a re-orientation of the self that signaled a radically different social subjectivity. “Different systems of beauty culture,” Loy writes, “have compromised our inherent right not only to *be* ourselves but to *look like* ourselves [...]” (2018: 52). In her recognition of the performative personality, we can behold not only Loy’s call to the social player—“the society woman, the actor, the actress, the man of public career [...]” (2018: 53)—but moreover, her desire for self-autonomous interaction, the ability to *control* one’s self, or more specifically, one’s appearance. In heralding our current curatorial networks, Loy also prefigures a radically different subjectivity initiated in the embodiment of self-distortion. By positing a distinction between *to be* and *to look like*, Loy does not merely show the contours of subject-image divergence, but in fact suggests that appearance can supersede reality when we proceed from a counterfeit model.

Claude Cahun, like Loy, a Surrealist writing during the Interwar Period, provides us with another useful lens for exploring our own cultural practices informed by the exigency of fabrication as a form of self-transformation. Cahun’s memoir, *Disavowals*, begins on this very moment of staging and framing: the filmic techniques that were becoming increasingly more common at the turn of the twentieth-century.

The lens tracks the eyes, the mouth, the wrinkles skin deep ... the expression on the face is fierce, sometimes tragic. And then calm—a knowing calm, *worked on*, flashy. A *professional smile*—and voilà! The hand-held mirror reappears, and the rouge and eye shadow. A beat. Full Stop. New paragraph. *I’ll start again*. (Cahun, 2018: 1; my emphasis)

Here we see not only the degree to which a face is alternately tracked and detached—the eyes, the mouth, the wrinkles—but also how the human expression reduces to a ritual of labor within its increasing industrialization. The human fabric of a face has turned commercial; the image of humankind has turned into its advertisement. And yet the attention remains on an ever-revolving newness. The opportunity of always-beginning-again is only made possible because the scene itself is mediated through role-playing and its technology. In being recorded, it can be repeated. The fact of its fabrication means very little, and in spite or maybe exactly because of its value as art, or artifice, the embodied performance “trains the eye [...] what comes after, what a waste of time!” (Cahun, 2018: 2)

Post Internet culture has largely meant a movement from acceleration to synchronicity. No longer do images simply reproduce, but they overlap and pile atop each other, bleeding into the edge of now-ness which purports to present everything all the time and at the same time. Cahun, known for her staged self-portraits that

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<sup>1</sup> One need only look at Victor Brauner’s “Self Portrait with a Plucked Eye” (1931) in which the Surrealist artist portrays himself with his right eye detached, to glean the gravity of his real-life eye-gouging seven years later.



manifested her gender-fluid persona, insists that to show herself means to show her outermost layer— “[o]nly ever travel in the prow of myself” (2), she writes, a reminder to herself and instructions for readers—yet modernization has also meant increasing interiorization: the domestic space of the home, or the home screen from where to represent the universe and sustain the illusion of mankind within mankind’s images. What comes after—what is produced or fails to—is subverted by the anticipation engendered by the performance. In our current culture of impersonations, too, and our continuous negotiation of intimacy and distance rendered through self re-presentation, it is always the *before* which both precedes but also takes precedence over every after.

By employing a phenomenological framework to update theories of the relationship between text and reader, we can also better grasp not only the intention of so much self(ie)-directed virtual foreplay, but also its residual returns. We can connect seemingly disparate subjects—the solitude of reading and image-based social interaction—because both depend on a process of imagination and ideation, each of them rooted in visualization on behalf of the active viewer-reader. Wolfgang Iser’s theory of the dyadic relationship between text and reader is located in a theory of response that relies upon the invisible experience inherent in all interpersonal relations. In modeling his own argument on R.D. Laing’s phenomenological research, especially Laing’s assertion that humankind, in our recognition of always being seen, and always being seen in particular ways, are “constantly acting in the light of the actual or supposed attitudes, opinions, needs, and so on the other has in respect of [us]” (Laing and Lee, 1966: 4), Iser is able to demonstrate how all contact begs the act of continually filling in this central gap of experience: what remains invisible and unknown to us, and yet what begs to be written. Communication in literature, Iser clarifies, “is a process set in motion and regulated, not by a given code, but by a *mutually restrictive* and magnifying interaction between the *explicit and the implicit*, between *revelation and concealment*. What is concealed spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed [...]” (2014: 111; my emphasis).

Communication does not curtail in the gap between two bodies but in fact begins there, reconstituting us as social beings only *because* it breaks down. In literature and life, in the absence of knowability or the ability to *share experience*—a precursor to any endeavor of intimacy and empathy—experience becomes, paradoxically, shared. The magnification of pleasure corresponds to the degree of its restriction; consent consummates in no act except the act of interpretation. We need not move any further than the screens we carry with us and which we carry within us to recognize how exposure and abatement work in tandem to produce an attraction propelled by an image of ourselves that is itself based on what others imagine us to be. After the multiplication of self-modifications, we would be hard-pressed to know the difference between who we are and what we look like, or whether *being* has in fact wholly been replaced by its imitation. To escape the face is to arrive into something that better resembles one’s self.



In vastly different ways, the work of interdisciplinary artists Juliana Huxtable and Frances Stark, on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art's *Art in the Age of the Internet* exhibition (2018), negotiate the realm of fantasy while actualizing autonomy. Huxtable's *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)* depicts the transgender African-American artist as a deracialized cyborg princess, calling to mind the hybridity of Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto," and both the inherent pleasure and the political method produced through the confusion of boundaries, a self constructed in "the self-knowledge of a self-who-is-not" (Haraway, 2001: 299). And just as "'women of colour' might be understood as a cyborg identity" while "cyborg writing" relocates the master's tools to "mark the world that marked them as other" (Haraway, 2001: 311), Huxtable explains her hybridity by calling attention to the intermingling of our online and IRL presences, the face in flux, molding or mending it to match our personality: "I used to feel a bit powerless, and it was actually through playing with my body as an image file that could be manipulated, distorted, rendered, decorated, and placed in new contexts that I came to accept and feel at home in my body as it is currently, but also to imagine how it might move into the future" (Huxtable, 2018).



Figure 1. *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)*

'realness' of knowing each other. There was no real need to ever think about what might happen in real life" (Stark, 2018; my emphasis). The eroticism of absence is here

Experience involves the recognition of social life's inherently invisible—and artificial—nature. It's not that we believe the lie; it's that we believe the act of lying, and at stake is not just the truth of our present reality, but the future we hope to pave through our proliferation of selves. In imagining how one's body "might move into the future" one necessarily has to wait. It is this ritual of anticipation—and its function for the exchange of intimacy—that Stark's animated video, *My Best Thing*, interrogates. Following two computer-generated avatars who speak by returning a series of questions, the film itself is a virtual re-visitation of the relationships the artist had formed with two Italian men she met during her excursions in video sex chat rooms. "I got fascinated by feeling so intensely for people I didn't know," Stark explains. "One of the things that made the intimacy possible was the fact that there was no interest or expectation in gauging the



manifested in absencing one's self from the physical body and its tangible reality of consequence and consummation, but also in allowing possible interiorities to remain undiscovered and undiscoverable to each other and one's self.

Hannah Arendt, in her discussion of private property and the public realm in *The Human Condition*, accounts for intimacy's inherent reliance on privacy, its relegation to remaining hidden "if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense." Intimacy's power is located, in other words, not by being recognizable, but by "rising into sight" (Arendt, 1998: 71; my emphasis). What is most

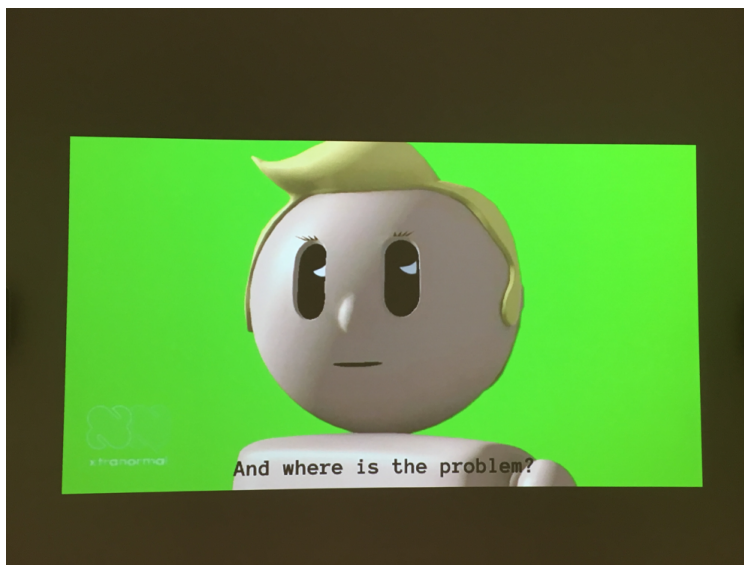


Figure 2. Film still from *My Best Thing*

useful to this analysis is that any representation of

intimacy is always supplanted by the inert image's potential to provoke an active experience—not arisen or raised but the measureless, indefinite horizon of *rising*, which is both a lengthening and an intensification, a magnification toward the future outside the frame. And yet, in today's traversals of likeness and being, do we still have to choose between image and action, the wish and its fantasy-fulfillment? Earlier in the same chapter, Arendt provides her own counterpoint when she admits that "even the greatest forces of intimate life [...] lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance" (1998: 50).

The pleasure, and power, as in Iser's theory of reading, becomes reified in the exchange itself; our imaged and imagined encounters with one another recall both the interaction between text and reader, and also the "shifting blank" (Iser, 2014: 118) of a fictional text which both induces *and* guides the activity. The phatic communion born through art, and moreover, the art of self-creation, has so often made possible the arrival of intense, and unlikely, connections, an intimacy or self-sovereignty that may arrive through "auto-facial construction" or from an imaginary encounter but which offers something very real.



It's important, too, to mark our affinity for auto-fiction<sup>2</sup> while situating it within a history of self-liberation and the collective realizations of freedom. Even Hegel, notoriously silent about extant slavery in the articulation of his master-slave dialectic, acknowledged during his Berlin lectures, more than ten years after the Battle of San Domingo and the birth of Haiti, that freedom can only be fulfilled "when what a human being ought to be appears as the external world that he makes his own" (1995: 228). And yet today, it is often the case that "what a human being ought to be" has been conditioned to appear, and moreover, to unconditionally correspond with a world of one's own making. The realization of Plato's divine demiurge also provides a window into the increasing insularity of human existence and its dangers that move beyond interpersonal relations.

### Self-Customization and its Codified Body

The current Chinese fixation with often dangerous facial procedures predicated on their own avatar aspirations, what I've elsewhere described as a move from manufacturing digital desire to materializing it in the physical (Campanioni, 2018) is not a phenomenon limited to China and its social media giant Meitu. The compulsion to curate flawless images of one's self has propelled an increasing desire to form photogenic faces from which to photograph in the Western world too, evidenced most recently in a *New York Times* report that credits videoconferencing and social media with the rise of jawline reconstruction in the United States. The quantity of encircling images, and our ability to see our own face in continual constellation has led to a sensitivity at odds with skeletal aging; the ways in which the human face resorbs bone over time, the ways our facial scaffolding shrinks as our lifespan lengthens. Revealingly, the *Times* article focuses less on our cultural fascination and more on its own contribution to the growing phenomenon, evaluating different options, ranging from FaceTite—a procedure that delivers radio frequency energy beneath the skin—to makeup demonstrations from professional cosmeticians available, coincidentally, on YouTube.

I am less concerned with adding to this body of reviews for the care of facial manipulation and reconstruction and more interested in asking how images of humankind make and unmake us into simultaneous creator and created, embodied and interpreted, authors and inscribed, a dialectic that can help us map our own progression from selfhood to the transubstantiation of subject/object/self, and the *insecurity* it determines and is determined by. What does it mean to be "camera-ready" in a world where cameras, too, have been integrated with our own body? It is no

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<sup>2</sup> I am using this term outside of its literary context while drawing attention to its popularity as an art form, or what Arendt calls the "artistic transposition of individual experiences" (1998: 50).



coincidence that AirSculpt, one of the most popular procedures cited in the *Times* report, is a method likened to “using Photoshop on the face” (Boncompagni, 2018: D4). The collapse between digital and physical, photo-editing applications and facial alterations, is the inevitable upshot of a wish fulfillment that has found in social media its ideal medium, only to rematerialize as an alternating current of passion and impassibility, self-security and inequality, in the offline world.

It is important now to step back, to see ourselves outside ourselves, if only to reckon more closely with our data double. Although the term was coined in 2000 (Haggerty and Ericson), its literal traces can be found in Alan Westin’s 1967 term “data shadow” (84) and nineteen years later, in Kenneth C. Laudon’s (1986) “data image,” the repercussions of the “dossier society” of his book’s title. Our own understanding of the socialization inhering any data double finds its origins in Deleuze and Guattari’s “dividual” (1987: 341), alluding to the individuation of data and its use as a subsequent mechanism of social control. Borrowing from Foucaultian biopolitics, Julio Cesar Lemes de Castro calls this mode of management “algorithmic governance” (2018: 166): the regulation and relegation of self which characterizes social networks today. What distinguishes algorithmic governance from eighteenth-century biopower is precisely that its interest lies not only in the individual, but what’s *inside* of each person, what leaks *out*: our human traits which can be counted and quantified by machines. How does this assessment react to and re-form our images of humankind? How has this corresponding pattern altered the ways we map the territory of our everyday life, or the ways we imagine our co-presence inside a geography that is also increasingly costumed and customizable?

Iser, writing in 1980, is quick to point out the “obvious and major difference between reading and all forms of social interaction [...] the fact that with reading there is no *face-to-face situation*. A text,” he argues, “cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with” (2014: 109). In contradistinction, we should acknowledge the many different ways in which the very occasion for *reading* requires the presence of faces converging and corresponding. Ultimately, we should acknowledge the many different ways in which texts today readily adapt themselves to each reader in a customizable, curatorial silo situated in the predictive analytics made possible by the images we first put out to the world. Perhaps with this assessment in mind, Castro likens Google Maps to the company’s own search engines, in which “algorithmic governance presents itself in the experience of each user” (2018: 180). Google Maps, too, requires and relies upon the same kind of hyperspecialization, fundamentally altering our reality by trading in objective public space for a global vision of the world that is different for each user, a profitable company *over-sight* that goes beyond the semantically superficial, and the recent furor over the rendering of “fake names” passed off as real neighborhoods across Google Maps’ pixelated cityscape (Nicas, 2018), an increasingly common occurrence in which the counterfeit replaces the original.



If it's true, as Google co-founder Sergey Brin told the editor-in-chief of *MIT Technology Review* in 2005, that "the perfect search engine would be like the mind of God" (Ferguson, 2005), then God, too, becomes no longer a set-apart singular entity which rationalizes and orders life but an omniscient, crowd-sourced heterarchy of power and influence, reverberating in every keystroke or thumb print we offer or leave behind. At stake in either scenario is not just our embodied subject position in the world, but how the world is imagined and interpreted in turn; how the world performs for our image-rich human theater. Loy's assertion that auto-facial construction augurs a newfound vitality for actors in everyday life needs to be balanced with the stipulation that actors depend on writers, directors, and producers, not to mention other actors. They are at the mercy of others who control their movements and dictate their scripts from which to perform. There is a limit, a threshold, from which one cannot always pass within the self-made space fostered by social media and other virtual encounters. It's important to understand how these inevitable barriers arise not merely from the ways in which we write ourselves or are written, but largely because of systemic inequality.

Because AI software is still largely written by affluent white men, it will inevitably reflect and reproduce their assumptions and biases, along with their cultural worldview. However, unlike human beings, algorithms can't be asked to engage in any kind of meta-critique; we ask nothing of algorithms except that they are both created in our image and re-create our images. And yet, the March 2018 vehicular manslaughter by a self-driven Toyota Camry reminds us that, although information travels around algorithmic systems set free from human creators and free of human oversight, there are moments in which algorithms portray human-like fallibility, a disfigurement or defect programmers call "spaghetti code" (Smith, 2018). If our image of objective reality has been reframed under the mathematical detachment of algorithms, it is important to also recognize a parallel development within our collective images of humankind, and consequently, an empathy deficit premised on infrastructure and security, the ensuing archetypal and architectural demands of our conquest of images.

Georg Simmel, writing in 1903, probed the effect of the metropolis's *intensification of nervous stimulation*—its "rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions" (1969: 48). Emotions, in Simmel's analysis, give way for sensations; feelings are superseded by awareness. Yet the money economy which characterizes the metropolis also exchanges empathy for intellect. Revealingly, it is the *anonymity* of modernity's market production—transactions between consumers who, as Simmel says, never "personally enter the producer's field of vision" (1969: 49)—which debases humanity, having the effect of reducing intimacy and genuine individuality, and promoting "an inconsiderate hardness" (Simmel, 1969: 49) that itself reduces to the calculating exactness of schematized existence—today's aggregated algorithms—and the casual indifference of desensitization—a world so accustomed to looking at its own image, it



can't bear to look inside for the reality such images blow-up, which is to say, the reality that is both enlarged and annihilated.

The alienation borne by the proliferation of images is perhaps nowhere more explicitly traced than in Martin Heidegger's influential essay, "The Age of the World Picture." By characterizing the human sciences as an ongoing activity measured by its institutionalization as well as its being "circumscribed by means of its results" (Heidegger, 1977: 124), Heidegger is able to contrast his moment of "the research man" (1977: 117)—and the disappearing scholar—with the Ancient Greeks, for whom nothing was exact, nothing *set in place*; in being unknown, earlier phenomena could remain a rigorous object of study. When all things can be calculated completely—and we might add, immediately—Heidegger contends that things become suddenly incalculable. What counts, then, in a system of self-security and foreclosed investigations? The "struggle of world views" (Heidegger, 1977: 135) and "the decision concerning what must be allowed to count as an object" (Heidegger, 1977: 151) are each at stake, in Heidegger's time as in today, and it is useful for us to position Heidegger's 1938 analysis with Walter Benjamin's "Task of the Translator" seventeen years earlier, in which Benjamin called for a concept of life that includes everything which "has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history" (1968: 71).

Hugo Ball, founder of the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich on the eve of the first World War, characterized the everyday life of 1913 in his diary by equating technology's subconscious influence to the destruction of human rhythm, a reproduction that counterfeits not only originals, but life itself (1996: 4). The ethical issue of technology's dispossession of authenticity recurs years later, in Benjamin's more well-known "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" a treatise concerned with the ritualization of art-reproduction but also art's emancipation from its parasitical dependence on ritual, a turn from the private sphere of the collector to the public enjoyment of mass culture (Benjamin 2008). It's also useful to look ahead, to better understand how Heidegger's argument informs Arendt's hypothetical supposition in the prologue to *The Human Condition*, that "knowledge [...] and thought have parted company for good" (1998: 3) for all modern persons who can no longer understand the things that, nevertheless, we are able to do. It is no wonder then that Heidegger ends his own essay by ruminating on the *shadow* of what remains impenetrable today: a shadow that partly obscures a subject while at the same time testifying to the fact of its existence. Heidegger says that we are denied this knowledge because we are so consumed by our own self-deception. By contrast, it is only through "heedlessness" (Heidegger, 1977: 153) that mankind can reclaim a level of insecurity and uncertainty that is central to actual representation, a history that is not self-assured but stochastic, liminal, productively unstable. What better way for man to "overcome himself as subject" (Heidegger, 1977: 154) than by surrendering to ourselves, and to the silence, if not also the secret that offers itself to exposure and revelation: a being-with-another that becomes a being-*for*-another.



## Tracing Faces Within Social Security

I've taken a photo of my face; I took a photo of my face and blotted out all my features. It was the subject of my first hybrid book—a generic marker that says more



Figure 3. *Double Vision*

about its half-and-half author than anything inside the text. Poetry, prose, essay, uncategorizable. The faceless portrait on a page without any numbers, *unlocatable*. It became my author photo; it travels with me, as all photographs have always done, wherever I go. The difference is only that today, our photographs speak to us: each image calls us by our name.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph J. Atick, founder and CEO of Visionics and the inventor of face recognition technology never predicted where his algorithm-rich software would go. I am not talking about location but distance. I am talking about the depths. I am talking about the insidious forms of control and manipulation. Face It, the first application was called, in 1995. *Face it.*

"I grew up in Jerusalem, where it was necessary to always

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<sup>3</sup> Exchangeable Image File Format data is written into your camera or cell phone's storage every time you take a photo. Besides the superficially obvious (the actual picture), it records all sorts of other information as well, including date, time, camera settings, copyright information, and even GPS coordinates. *No ExIFF*: a sequel, a play. A photograph has always told me so much more about the person behind the camera, instead of the subjects in front of it—but how much more remains to be seen. The future, with all of its geo-tagged prerequisite possibilities, is bent on *full disclosure*.



travel with an ID, to present it two or three times a day, to go from one town to the other,” Atick says, from my vantage point on the couch as I watch his flickering image on television. As he talks, footage flashes from 2017 Joseph Atick to black and white, intentionally grainy video of women, children, men all lined up to have their identities checked by stern-looking officers. Black and white to color, Atick to an audience of extras, and back again. “I believed that we needed something that was more effective in securing the world” (Costrell, 2017).

It is important again to contextualize this demand for security based on social coercion and state-mandated law, each of which have had pervasive effects on a person’s *right to move*. Soon after France’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789 came a passport law (*Loi relative aux passeports*), a new constitution, and a new civil code, all within the span of thirteen years. The law of “card and code” (Noiriel, 1996: 76) was born, with it came the discourse of foreignness and alienness. And two centuries later, Atick’s phone rang. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Criminal Justice Information Services, and North America’s Biometric Center all kept calling, wanting to learn more about this new technology, wanting to know how they might purchase it, adopt it into their own operations. Atick’s phone kept ringing. But even as the world’s desire to speak with him intensified, it was expression itself that was—and continues to be—at stake, a contingency that Atick himself recognizes, in comparing contemporary Western society to oppressive regimes of the past:

I grew up in a world where identity was part of our daily experience at a time when the world was in conflict. In societies where there was an oppressive regime, there was a chilling factor. People did not express themselves freely, because there was a fear they would be persecuted. Now we have a different kind of chilling factor and it is driven not by governments necessarily, but by the surveillance camera. And that chilling factor, it means we are going to change our behavior and we no longer live in a free society. Will that be a society that we accept? (Costrell, 2017)

On the first day of class, in the “Identity, Image, & Intimacy in the Age of Internet” course I designed and teach at Baruch College in New York City, I introduce something unusual into a seminar meant to fulfill expository writing requirements for undergraduates: Quantum Mechanics. Taking the “Observation Effect” (Buks, Schuster, Heiblum, Mahalu, Umansky, 1998) as a starting point, students are urged to consider the explicit ways the self is formed in another’s gaze. Researchers in the late Nineties coined the “Observer Effect” after building a tiny device that measured less than one micron in size, which had a barrier with two openings. They sent a current of electrons towards the barrier; the electrons inevitably shifted course after being seen. In effect or affect, the simple act of observation dictates behavior. But today, when are we *not* being observed? As Joseph Atick continues to speak on the screen before me, I am observing my own aptitude for recording the evidence in real time: hyper-curation and self-archival in our aggregate of identity.

“There are more cameras now than humans in the world,” Atick says, while more stock footage rolls of people walking in Times Square, phones and cameras out. And



whether or not we believe him, it's not the actual cameras that concern me about Jeremy Bentham's modern-day Panopticon, it's what we decide to do with the footage; the ways in which we are connected to our cameras; the ways in which our cameras connect us with the world. Atick's original aim to facilitate the everyday processes of access has now inhibited passage, while obscuring the examination from ever formally occurring within our line of sight.

Atick might not have been able to predict the effect of the technology he helped create, but he was certainly motivated in the years prior to its ritual exploitation by governments across the world. In an Israeli news article titled "The changing face of airport security," published a little over a month after the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, Atick links security with defense and conflates a desire for comfort with the need for protection:

We feel we're doing something to help this country defend itself. Terrorists aren't born overnight. They are indoctrinated, schooled. Somebody checks your credit card when you buy something. Why can't we check if you're a terrorist or not when you're boarding a plane? (ISRAEL21c, 2001)

Mariella Pandolfi, in her discussion of the "Age of Intervention," writes of a space where "the different moments of military intervention, humanitarian operations, security concerns, and foreign investments are seamlessly implicated in one another, ironically all in the name of 'good governance' and its alleged principles of transparency, responsibility, and technical efficiency" (2013: 166). Pandolfi, in exploring the relationships between state institutions, NGOs, and multilateral agencies—forces which claim to represent different interests but which all concern themselves with the management of freedom, which is to say: the freedom of the consumer—is also positioning our emerging moment of everyday emergency and international security, the upshot of neoliberal strategies imposed upon "a strategy of risk management" (Pandolfi, 2013: 167) between "threats" as far-ranging as poverty and crime to migratory flows. If the new politics of empire is global biopolitics, as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and several others have argued, then this totalizing grid consumes the individual in all aspects of their life, eating away outmoded notions of privacy and self-sovereignty until it consumes the body, too, turning flesh into just another object, or worse, a new form of subjectivity that desires its own biometric control. We know this is true because we have seen the process move through each successive stage within our own lifetime, nowhere as rapid as during the last decade.

And yet, how to destroy one's population without destroying one's self? If the normal state of the world is war, as Negri argues in his *Reflections on Empire*, then our current war is unlike any war of the past. Just as there are no longer any nation-states within a transnational neoliberal logic, there are also no longer any nation-state enemies. Thus, in place of a sovereign enemy, there is simply the citizen-suspect, "ungraspable and continually disappear[ing] in the crowd [...] an elusive and amorphous network that [can]not be contained within boundaries—a contagious virus



[...] [a] pervasive, invisible enemy” (Negri, 2008: 52). If for Lévinas (2007) the face yields an encounter that necessitates accountability to the other, technology inverts this trajectory; in every repetition of facial recognition, we are held accountable for ourselves.

In response, war becomes a series of civil, or internal, wars, the threat of which requires security; security requires surveillance. An enemy without or within borders folds in upon an empire without a center—decentered, pervasive; the center cannot hold—empty except for its expansive reach into our inner lives. Negri reminds us that war is inherently destructive, and in being destructive, war has the capability of destroying itself. Transnational capitalism needs consumers for capital flow; to prevent the mass death of its *target population*—in every sense of the word—war reduces but also expands into prevention, policing. We bow down for that kind of security.

India, which has added tens of millions of Internet users in the last few years but remains without substantial data protection laws, has become a case study for the rest of the increasingly biometric world. In late September of 2018, India’s Supreme Court placed restrictions on the government’s national biometric identity system while alternately declaring that the program did not violate the privacy rights of India’s 1.3 billion residents. Aadhaar, which means “foundation” in Hindi, was conceived with the intention of saving taxpayer money, identifying potential fraud in welfare programs by scanning fingerprints, irises, and faces of every Indian citizen. The shift from saving to security, and protection to detention, is often porous. Earlier in the same month, news reports began to circulate about China’s mass arrest of ethnic Uighur Muslims in Hotan, in the western region of Xinjiang. Charged with nothing other than being a minority culture and practicing Islam, hundreds of thousands of Chinese Muslims have been detained or disappeared within a vast network of camps called “transformation through education” centers (Buckley, 2018). Not coincidentally, the towns that stretch along Xinjiang are wired with the same surveillance technology that has increasingly become mainstreamed into our Western entertainment: facial and voice recognition. As we turn from being arrested by a personal device from which to see ourselves and see the world, to being subject to a gaze that literally prohibits our mobility, we need to further examine how our images of humankind produce human inequalities.

## The Crisis of Visuality

News images and cultural representations of refugees within our current “migration crisis”—a term that elides both the perpetual nature of passage, and also many of the reasons for moving—present certain forms of visibility that mobilize various actions from viewers, none of which, I argue, are productive. In portraying the flow of migration as a crisis, the media articulates, also, a concomitant humanitarian emergency that needs to be acted upon; we are invited to participate, both as voyeurs



and as activists working within the realm of compassion and empathy. What is also obscured by this invitation is not our own contribution to the industry of humanitarianism but on the contrary, a critical response to the political structures and policies that generate displacement and the extraction of labor. Resisting the common and dangerous rhetoric of the “migration crisis,” I argue instead that we are today experiencing a crisis of moral responsibility. In this miasma, the collective imagination of many migrants is circumscribed around an image of threat or victimization, antithetical caricatures that are in fact fungible. Consequently, refugees become either victim or perpetrator, and sometimes both, but never what’s underneath the cultural persona: human. Roger Silverstone’s work on the moralizing issues at play in the media’s reductive representations of victim or evil-doer is especially pertinent to this analysis; each role, he insists, arises from an image that reflects our own attraction. In this way, representations of migrants say more about us than about them, and media representations structure our desires through cultivating “simplicity, comfort and order in our everyday lives” (Silverstone, 2002: 777) while relieving viewers – us – of engagement and ethical responsibility. Recall the same base desires – comfort, security – that instigated our adoption of facial-recognition technology in 2001; in subjecting ourselves to biometric control, we, too, have objectified others under the same dizzying influence of order and objectivity, the marketable fabrication hawked by companies like Facebook and Google who sell and defend their algorithms on promises of rationality (Smith, 2018).

Inherent in any claim of a reality is a claim to a truth, and what is circulated by the media is not merely the images of self and other, but a complicity of mediation, which, Silverstone points out, always involves “not two but three parties: the represented, the representing, and the witnesses to the representation” (2002: 777). Whereas a politics of “play” might have helped stimulate both self-recognition and intimacy with the other in the work of Huxtable and Stark, here we must reckon with the game and our role as participants while comprehending our own personal accountability, which requires not that we drop out, but on the contrary, that we reorient our practices and our critical understanding within this shared activity. “For there are no innocent witnesses in the world,” Veena Das makes clear, “in which Empire creates and then feeds on images of disaster” (2016: 177).

In any discussion of the images of humankind who are viewed as sub-human, it is important to limn the distinction between visibility – what we see – and visibility – the *politics* of such representation, which necessarily implies a struggle over what, and who, gets to be represented (Mirzoeff, 76: 2006). Threat and victimization, each in their own way, adjust viewers’ attentions toward an ethics of care or a policy of denunciation while static migrants paradoxically become vehicles for discussion and study in popular culture and in academia, spoken about and spoken for but never permitted to speak for themselves, possessed as objects or objectified images and yet dispossessed of what Arendt calls “the relevance of speech” (1998: 3), the precursor for becoming a political being. Arendt’s ethics of public participation necessitates a greater



understanding of our vastly different subject positions in the world. “Being seen and being heard by others,” Arendt remarks, “derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (1998: 57). And yet the mediation of everyday life instills an individualism that is alternately rooted in difference without commonness and commonness without difference, having neither the proclivity nor any capacity for communicating the nuances, complexities, and contradictions inherent in the human experience.

Arendt’s “common world” as a form of history that transcends the past and future, a world that is literally before us and that will be there after us; a world that moreover depends on the presence of publicity against the ruins of time, meets its counterpart in the marginalized self. In this notion of commonality, slavery was not just a life sentence but an after-life sentence; being deprived of visibility and the access to the public realm, the slave passes away leaving no traces of ever having lived. Wholly unlike ancient Greece and Rome, when the public realm provided the only place for mankind to show who they really and inextricably were, today’s ubiquitous public space and its increasing domestication have facilitated only a greater degree of normalization, conformity, and the reduction of the singular to a universal model.

In the migrant’s dual appropriation by the state—first as a body of labor, and then as an image requiring state security or state-sanctioned humanitarian engagement—we are forced to return to the borders between being and likeness, humankind and its images. “To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life,” Arendt writes (1998: 58) and we need only to glance at our screens to see how today’s migrants live an existence that is at once private and public. In summarizing the liberation of the working classes and women as characteristic of a modern age “which no longer believes that bodily functions and material concerns should be hidden” (1998: 73), Arendt forgets the figure of the migrant, an elision that speaks to the migrant’s larger removal from our collective consciousness—we who depend on the migrant’s body as an immediate (scopic) or eventual (consumer) source of pleasure while failing, largely, to limn such body labor, or its contribution to our commonwealth.

What is most striking about the “Auto-Facial Construction” with which I opened this analysis is not that, in being produced in 1919, Loy’s “facial integrity” prophesizes our own “Complexion Culture” (Loy, 2018: 53), but that our complexion culture, armed as we are with sophisticated technology, has not yet delivered on the promise of a personality that transcends the body. Silverstone, too, recognizes both the imaginative and the aesthetic entrenchment in bodily experience, and ultimately, the face-to-face interactions which both require and reproduce comfort and security. Growing developments between social interaction and Augmented Reality remind us of the efficacy of our bodies, and the need and desire to express one’s self—to authenticate one’s personality online—through the emotions conveyed by the face.



## Augmented Reality and Diminishing Returns

It begins, invariably, on self-expression, self-apprehension. Rendering of location, relinquishing of one's position. The exchange of an image for an augmented reality. They return by taking video to the face, converting it from 2-D to 3-D in real time by attaching a head that can morph. Misha Leybovich, who founded digital start-up Meograph in 2012, believes that this method will also transform our cultural norms, spurring an industry-wide shift in transparency and empathy (personal communication, July 17, 2018).

Morf itself grew out of another Meograph app called Flippy, which allowed users to swap faces on a celebrity's body to play out scenes from Hollywood films or music videos. But the shift from wish fulfillment to personal projection was also driven by availability and cost. "We can only produce bodies so much," Leybovich says. "They're expensive and they take a lot of time to produce."

Compounding the problem of body-production is the reality that creating full 3-D scenes also requires a lot of money and time. With that understanding and the experience gained from Flippy, Leybovich thought: Why not make use of your own environment? Why not turn yourself into an avatar and fly around your apartment or the street? Injecting faces into environments presents its own challenge: body control. Leybovich's ultimate aim is to allow users the ability to animate their body based on facial expressions, departing the analytical world of cognition for the bodily reflex and intuition.

"We are going to want all the best things for our digital selves that we want for our physical selves – probably even better things," Leybovich says, "since our digital selves can do things our bodies can't." And yet in order to achieve "all the best things for our digital selves" it is necessary to use all of what the physical body has to offer. Before Meograph created Meo, there were two ways to build an avatar: cartoons – like Bitmojis and Animojis – and puppets, which are limited by a single static facial capture. Faced with the option of expressing one's self as a cartoon or an animal, or through a puppet that can't replicate the dynamics of our faces – the expressions based on minute facial reactions that give ourselves to the other, and give ourselves away – all the things we do without thinking about it disappear or become distorted. Lévinas reminds us that our affinity for "putting on poses" (1995: 86) arises from the essential poverty of our surface value – our face's ability to expose us, to betray us. Being and likeness are inextricably linked, not only in the performance of fantasy but to its ultimate *composition*, the authorization of identity, the ideation of authorship. Meograph's own origins, rooted in what was hailed as "four-dimensional storytelling" with a debut product that allowed users to create, share, and watch interactive multimedia stories, exemplifies the fundamental confluence between our psychic and aesthetic impulses, narrative creativity and the creation of self.

Avatars are a big business; self-curation will only increase their market value, already exemplified by Fortnite, the free-to-download massive multiplayer shooter and



the world's most popular video game today, already accounting for over three hundred million dollars a month on customizations of characters that aren't even you (Feldman, 2018). A lot of very real money passes hands in the cosmetics-quest to adorn characters with looks that represent their users, despite the fact it's only just recently become possible to use video to render a face, to blend that face into a head, to blend that avatar into an environment regardless of its lighting, or the skin tone of the user within it. Meograph is hoping not only to be at the forefront of AR facial technology, but in doing so, actively work in re-orienting our social and cultural norms, responding to catfishing and a culture of fake information and fake users by building data-structures into its technology that have a "real score" and a "lie score," championing transparency and allowing users to answer their own self-interrogation, an inquiry that will likely become increasingly common: *To what degree was this person morphed?*

The language of the face is about being able to express ourselves, but it's also about being able to understand another person. The Internet has decoupled us from our bodies; the flip-side is that it's given people free reign to be their worst selves. If it were our faces on Twitter—our real faces—perhaps trolling would recede; maybe shaming would begin to diminish too. Leybovich's supposition is exactly this: the more that we engage with each other, the more we have an opportunity to use some approximation of our faces, the more we will become our real selves online. Being able to see how other people are reacting in real time when interaction occurs will foster a need and a desire not only for radical transparency but also radical empathy.

Nevertheless, we remain faced with the ethical question of how our images of humankind fix our embodied nature while fixing others in place. What does the popularity of Augmented Reality and its pairing with a reconstruction of the face indicate to us except that we have eyes to see, and yet the image we most desire is the idealized interpretation of ourselves, and our world, obscuring the systematic processes of exclusion and dehumanization that are abstracted from reality through concurrent representations.

In the alternate present of Netflix's miniseries *Maniac*, goods and services are traded to the penniless for "ad buddies," human pop-ups that accompany destitute customers—on the train, in the pizza parlor—to sell them more goods and services they can't buy. In this truly post-consumer world, publicity has wholly overtaken the private realm; ultimately, what's traded for the opportunity to acquire things is not money but solitude. The ability to be by one's self, in the show as outside of it, has been exchanged for the ability to buy one's self. Advertising for advertising's sake reinvests itself in the assembly line of perpetual proxies, in which autonomy, too, is just another substitute for our fiction of the freedom of the consumer. In this speculative present, the irony of selling things to people who can't afford to buy them is in fact the point; publicity, which has always played off of the possible acquisition of an impossible fantasy, has now overtly become only what it always implicitly was: a vacant gesture. Yet today's public paradox only begets another, still greater one: the blurring between



companionship and slavery, the consumer and the object of consumption. What is most striking about *Maniac's* sci-fi cityscape is not that “friend proxies” are available to purchase for the public manifestation of popularity, but that this pay-for-play socialization already exists in our everyday life founded on both appearance and likeness.

The citizens of *Maniac* may have the peculiar opportunity to eat lunch or ride the subway in exchange for being advertised to, but the only difference between their world and ours is consent; in our Post Internet culture awash in algorithmic governance, no formal transaction occurs whenever we are sold to and ultimately sold as products. Whereas the characters that populate *Maniac's* version of Manhattan know what they, in foregoing payment, are paying for, our loss of self-sovereignty is assumed and absolute, a prerequisite for the privilege of not only “getting the picture” in the Heideggerian sense but getting inside of it too. Today’s miraculous circulation of faces brings also the circular vision of gaining entry into the sphere of social capital for those who are currently excluded, the potential for radical reversal or re-view beginning and ending always on the same self-gaze: the mirror of one’s machine as a real optical illusion.

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