3 Uncertain faces

An investigation into visual forms for communicating otherness[1]

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1. Introduction: How to do things with facial images

The performativity of the artificial face when communicating the meaning of otherness is at the core of these pages. Before starting, I consider it appropriate to establish a few premises. In what follows, speaking of performativity implies considering those social exchanges that transmit knowledge and memory, as in the case of the sense of identity and otherness, through repeated actions or "twice behaved-behavior" (Schechner 2002: 29). In a dialogue with the proposals that performance studies (Diana Taylor 2016; Schechner 2002) have introduced into humanities, performativity is here understood as an epistemic lens, an efficient framework for the analysis of effects of meaning such as the process of identification, the fixing of identity normativity, or the exercising of practices of resistance. Understanding these processes as performances suggests that the performative nature of things can also function as an epistemology: as an embodied practice, the identification of performativity always offers a certain form of situated knowledge.

Stuart Hall's reflections (1996) on cultural identity as a dynamic process resonate with this perspective: he refutes existentialist conceptions of identity while making strategic and positional, thus performative, use of it. Based on this background, I also refer to identity as the result, whether by acceptance or rejection, of the load of meanings that collective writings deposit on the skin of each of us. Identity, then, is not to be thought of as a fixed ontology but as a performative space of tension that results from the intersection of different aspects – such as those related to ethnicity, class, gender, and so on – through which to understand the process of identification. Retrieving the lesson of intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 2017), thinking in terms of intersectionality allows us, in fact, to recognize the performative nature of identity, turning this category into a useful tool for mapping out how each identity experience is the result of situated effects of oppression and/or privilege. Within this perspective, thinking of the process of identity construction

DOI: 10.4324/9781003380047-3

means not so much referring to individuation according to subjectivity but to a dynamic of identification by means of which the subject relates to others, producing a sense of belonging to a community.

During identity performances, the Other – the alter – emerges and so does the ideological apparatus that shapes otherness. In our culture, one of the greatest areas of conflict in this confrontation has been the reproduction of facial images as visual artifacts where identity, and thus otherness, can be portrayed and communicated. For this reason, in what follows, I consider the visual reproduction of the face as a commutative project capable of conveying meaning effects concerning the identification process and that of othering. Within this viewpoint, it is possible to affirm that even though our every face is unique, it is precisely on the frontal surface of the head that facial trends can be established, also based on the sociocultural expectations which shape aesthetic models in accordance with parameters of belonging to a community (Leone 2021c). Maybe this is the reason why, as a visual artifact, the face has always been meaningful throughout history: "making one's or others' face(s) present in a distant space or in a distant time through visual simulacra is an old habit of the species" (Leone 2020a *Digital Cosmetics*: 551). Nevertheless, the introduction of photography and the possibility of the mechanical visual reproduction of the face significantly changed the meanings and uses of the surface par excellence of identification in both an honorific and a repressive way. As affirmed by Allan Sekula in his fundamental essay "The body and the archive":

> On the one hand, the photographic portrait extends, accelerates, popularizes, and degrades a traditional function . . . that of providing for the ceremonial presentation of the bourgeois *self*. At the same time, photographic portraiture began to perform a role no painted portrait could have performed in the same thorough and rigorous fashion. . . . [P]hotography came to establish and delimit the terrain of the other, to define both the *generalized look* – the typology – and the *contingent instance* of deviance.
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> (Sekula 1986: 6–7, italic in the original)

Nowadays, two hundred years after the invention of photography, our "iconosphere" is more than ever replenished with visual facial artifacts that translate ideological discourses into typification and deviance. At the same time, the mechanical nature of images has been updated with automated forms of re-producing the face. These automated facial images derive from the "automatization of the labor of looking" (Lee-Morrison 2019: 18), a labor that outstrips the human faculties, and the massive amounts of data that digital society produces.

From a historiographical point of view, photography before all other images assured adherence to the referent by means of the mechanical dimension of the device, its distinguishing feature. The referentiality promised by the photographic image created a unique link, an indexical one – that is, a spatiotemporal connection – between mechanically generated images and the realm of veracity. However, our present confronts us with a media ecology capable of challenging the epistemological paradigm of visuality using images that look like photography or, should we say, that activate meaning effects which inscribe them in the domain of the photographic. In an iconosphere of computer-generated images, artificial vision, and virtual reality, photographic images are increasingly in contact with and contaminated by digital practices. This change in the mediascape entails a new focus on the discursive aspect of the image: asserting that an image is a referent of something has become a rhetorical mechanism based on context rather than a feature guaranteed by the technical genesis of the image. So how are we to approach this visual horizon?

Some interpreters have already acknowledged the performativity of the face as an interface of communication and visual support in the sociocultural processes of identification. On the one hand, Ervin Goffman has investigated the ritual character of face-to-face interaction: from his perspective, as rituals are constitutive parts of everyday life, it can be said that our daily social fabric is made up of ritualizations that order our facial acts. In this sense, interactive rituals appear as embodied on faces whose expression is the mastery of gesture, the manifestation of emotions, and the ability to present convincing performances before society. For Goffman, people show their positions on the scale of prestige and power through a social face, an expressive mask that has been lent and attributed by society: those people interested in maintaining this social face must take care that a certain expressive order is preserved (Goffman 1956). On the other hand, it is possible to peruse a whole strand of studies attentive to recognizing those sociocultural writings that make the face a fertile medium for the recognition of otherness. Examples of this perspective are Joan Riviere's proposal to consider womanliness a mask to be worn (1929), Roland Barthes' interpretation of Greta Garbo's *face-as-object* (1957), and Laura Mulvey's feminist reflections on the facial close-up in classic Hollywood cinema (1975). In all these proposals, the facial image performs a sense of otherness according to gender bias through the media reification of what Simone de Beauvoir (1949) defined as the second sex. With these studies as background, in the next sections, I turn my attention to the sociocultural effects of facial images when produced through a nonhuman agency, taking into consideration the capacity of artificial intelligence systems to communicate otherness.

2. The semiotics of a precarious form of communicating otherness

After the terrorist attack at the World Trade Centre in New York in September 2001, the war in Afghanistan, and the circulation of automated devices for the detection and recognition of the enemy, the philosopher Judith Butler responds to the impacted media environment with a series of reflections concerning the conditions of representations of otherness. In *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (2004) they revise the theoretical proposals of Emmanuel Lévinas through a perspective aimed at problematizing an ethic of the precarious condition of human life represented in their contemporary mediascape. In particular, they dedicate an entire chapter to the representations of faces during the war in Afghanistan since: "all of these images seem to suspend the precariousness of life. . . . *They are the spoils of war, or they are the targets of war*" (2004: 143, italics in the original). In Butler's philosophical production (1990, 1993, 1997), the body has already been analyzed as precarious matter negotiated in space and time by a constitutive vulnerability. Public life, physical proximity, and exposure to the gaze of others always modulate the body. From this standpoint, and in the warfare that inaugurates the Third Millennium, Butler identifies in the openness that marks the body a porosity shaped by precarity. The philosopher introduces the latter term to indicate those conditions of protection and threat that are maximized or minimized by the differential distribution of exposure to damage. Recognizing the precariousness of the human ontological condition prompts Butler to investigate the ethical obligations arising from it in dialogue with the arguments presented in *Totalité et Infini: essai sur l'extériorité* ["Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority", 1961) by Emmanuel Lévinas.

In the essay, the Lithuanian philosopher proposes that to conceive subjectivity, it is necessary to abandon the category of totality and introduce that of infinity as a category to encompass the self and otherness in the same space-time. Infinity opens the possibility of a subjectivity that in itself contains the impossibility of fully embracing it and that comes from absolute exteriority. From this viewpoint, Lévinas indicates in the human face the communicative form of the infinity of otherness. The face is, under his perspective, never fully graspable and always ineffable because of its transitivity: it allows us to recognize the infinity of humanity as regards those not only in whom it has been recognized but also in whoever is performing the recognition. With the experience of the Jewish Holocaust at the core of his reflections, Lévinas considers the impossibility of looking at someone's face and not recognizing a human being since it is the face that communicates the infinity of what is human. Embracing this perspective, Butler also recognizes in the representations of the faces of the war in Afghanistan

diffused throughout their mediascape those of enemies, of heroes, and of victims too: "*dominant forms of representation* [that] can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended" (Butler 2004: XVIII, italics mine).

In the preface to their *Precarious Life*, the feminist philosopher writes that Lévinas makes use of the face "as a figure that communicates both the precariousness of life and the interdiction on violence" (*ibidem*). From this viewpoint, they reinforce the conceptualization of the primacy of otherness sustained by the formulation of a face-oriented structure in an ethical relationship. The face offers, in Butler's words, the infinite unspeakable message of precariousness, a porosity effect of constant sociocultural vulnerability and the limitation of linguistic articulations: "the face of the Other, and so the ethical demand made by the Other, is that vocalization of agony that is not yet language or no longer language" (*ibidem*: 139).

Butler places ethics within the public sphere, which implies understanding ethics not as pre-political but rather as an imperative interest for the collectivity (Loizidou 2007). In these pages, I am interested in the same ethical concern, which has at its core the capacity of automated facial images to socioculturally communicate otherness. This is why I suggest a cross-reading of Butler's and Lévinas' theses to detect, through a semiotic framework, which forms of communication of otherness artificial intelligence systems may enable. My proposal, thus, is to discern the performativity of the face as a communicative form of otherness based on Charles S. Pierce's theories. I suggest recognizing three facial effects that make otherness socioculturally communicable:

- a *surface effect* that concerns the qualities of otherness (like a Firstness in Peircean theory, CP.1.418)[2];
- an *interface effect* which interests the material actualization of otherness (like a Secondness CP. 1.419)[3]; and
- a *meta-face effec*t that corresponds to sociocultural laws and values of otherness (like a Thirdness CP. 1.420).[4]

The basting of this schema for the recognition of facial effects finds its basis in the validation of a pragmatic perspective. Continuing within Peirce (CP. 5.400), it is about considering what effects the communication of otherness through the face could conceivably have, and these effects, which Peirce defines as *habits*[5] (CP 5.538), are the conceptions of the object under analysis. In other words, the facial effects have practical consequences on the designing of the forms of communication of otherness. According to Peirce, the entire function of thought is to produce habits understood as cultural dispositions to action since to understand the meaning of a thing is to determine what habits it produces, for what a thing means is simply

what habits it involves. This is why it is possible to state that there is no distinction of meaning that does not consist of a possible practical difference. Meaning is to be sought in the effects and performativity that shape our sociocultural life. Consequently, if we wish to understand the meaning-effects that automated facial images produce within our culture, it is worth starting with the habits spread.

If we consider the global processes of broad diffusion of facial recognition technologies that started exactly after the terrorist attack of September 2001(Gates 2011) and the general resignification of the private sphere in favor of public security that occurred at the time – as testified by the dissemination of Paul Ekman's theories of emotion analysis and recognition[6] – in addition to the appearance of surveillance studies (Lyon 2007; Bauman and Lyon 2013; Browne 2015), today facial effects seem to differentially permeate the porosity of otherness. To understand these new habits, I refer once more to Butler:

> We may have to think of different ways that violence can happen: one is precisely *through* the production of the face, the face of Osama bin Laden, the face of Yasser Arafat, the face of Saddam Hussein. What has been done with these faces in the media? They are framed, surely, but they are also playing to the frame. And the result is invariably tendentious. These are media portraits that are often marshaled in the service of war, as if bin Laden's face were the face of terror itself, as if Arafat were the face of deception, as if Hussein's face were the face of contemporary tyranny.
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> (2004: 141, italics in the original)

In this passage, we find a question of the utmost importance, which is also formally evidenced in the original text. It deals with the processes of the production of faces that are the protagonists of war and the effects – the context that has been played out – that those processes have on the sociocultural reception of otherness. How do technologies endow the image of otherness? The faces of the Other become habits when they encounter screens which have a reactive function and the power to arrange lights according to ideological gazes and discourses. The encounter with the faces of the war and the manner of communicating them depend on the techno-ideologies diffused in the media context. In this sense, those reproduced faces embody the discursive sociocultural processes of identifying a particular type of othering: the enemy.

As Butler writes, those images are framed by a general visual grammar that makes them communicative forms for the embedding of otherness. The faces of Osama bin Laden, Yasser Arafat, Saddam Hussein, and

Afghan girls are all presented in the media as portraying a general process of identification. Through a formal enunciative *locus*, the portrait genre, those images set up a relationship in a figurative dialogue with the spectators. But how is this dialogue shaped and how does it function? It works within a visual re-assemblage at the service of war, as if these faces were synecdoches standing for the effects of the terrorist attack itself.

Just from these observations, we can say that each of those facial images of the war is deprived of the phenomenological infinite described by Lévinas and recuperated by Butler; there is no precariousness of life or interdiction on violence, nor is there transitivity: these faces are completely graspable, completely framed. This condition is defined by a scopic regime that intertwines the facial images with the semiotic forms allowed by warfare: they are the whole of the war. Thanks to a precise aesthetics of identification that guarantees the condition of production of an effect of verisimilitude of the enemy, through a peculiar surface effect in those interfaces of the war, the infinite unspeakable message of precariousness is canceled. The erasure, the *meta-face effect*, makes those faces the surface of violence itself, allowing habits that intervene in the interpretation of the images reproduced by the media, rendering the facial artifact disconnected from the precariousness of the human condition.

Following a historical path that from Lévinas' times passes through the conflicts in Afghanistan up to the present, when those hostilities have ceased after twenty years of combat and when, meanwhile, other wars have started, it can be observed that the faces of war are still pervasive as forms of communication of otherness in our iconosphere. What is more, today there is the spread of automated portraying of the enemy. Facing this contingency, in global warfare that shows no sign of coming to a halt, how are we to look at the contemporary flood of automated facial images?

3. The resemblance of the iconic face of otherness

Throughout Western history, facial images have always been considered sensitive forms ready for the communication of identity. Let us just think of the story that comes to us from Pliny the Elder about Butades, the ancient sculptor who executed the first relief portrait, and his daughter Kora. Since his daughter had outlined on a wall the shadow of her lover before he left for war, Butades filled that silhouette with clay, obtaining an artifact capable of easing his daughter's grief at the departure of her beloved (*Nat. Hist.*, XXXV). In this chronicle, too, the face is indeed considered "a figure that communicates", as stated by Butler (*ibidem*: XVIII), a figure on and thanks to which a number of significant interactions take form from practices of identification to decodifications of both physiological and cultural

readings. These readings, for example, are those that we find in physiognomy, the pseudo-scientific gaze for interpreting what is invisible through the visible features of the face. This process of decodification has been enormously successful in different times and cultures, as attested by Chinese physiognomy and similar fields of study that have also been diffused in Arabic culture.

If the idea that from the external look of things it is possible to understand their nature is already present in Aristotle, it is with Johann Caspar Lavater's physiognomy during the second half of the eighteenth century that an attempt is made to free the human face from the typifying tendency that, in antiquity, provided a biased key to interpreting observed phenomena. From a gaze that refers to a cultural model, depending on situated values and ideologies, Lavater updates traditional physiognomic reasoning with a vision of the face as a unique and individualized window through which to understand human character. Within this same discipline and a few years later, while Lavater examines the motionless features of a face, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg concentrates on those signs that make the face changeable and express its emotional state. From fixed and genetic facial features, we move on to an increasingly pronounced focus on emotional impulses. Lichtenberg's intention is to avoid the popular misuse of physiognomy and, in response to his warning physiognomy, expands its domain to encompass the dimension of temporality, an interpretation that opens to the world and moves away from the human being, transferring its attention to different types of expression.

Since antiquity, thus, and through an always-situated reading of what naturalistic determinism might be, according to physiognomy the face can be interpreted through visible data to translate them into cultural outputs. In line with this approach, also thanks to the diffusion of technologies for the mechanic reproduction of facial images, such as the chair designed by Lavater for taking silhouettes and latterly photography, the face has undergone a progressive disembodiment leading to the diffusion of forms of codification that circulate independently from physical bodies and that can be codified through an equally disembodied form. This trajectory is constantly being updated and leads to what we can now think of in terms of an algorithmic physiognomy. In all these efforts to decompose and recompose the face we can recognize attempts to re-create a sense of identity. However, the progressive disembodiment that digital society confronts us with seems to mark a point of no return in the relationship between the face and its bearer: a progressive massification of data such that the decomposition and re-composition operations to which the physiognomic tradition had accustomed us cannot but be carried out by an intelligence capable of automatizing the processing of such a large mass of data that it escapes human cognition.

A turning point in the conception of our relationship with the face as a communicative form has been the development of cities and the dense network of mass media that is to be found in every metropolis. The urban dimension and the intricate social network that city fabrics weave lead to new discourse effects regarding processes of identification and practices for the attachment or resistance to a given community. Two good examples for grasping the status of this process are the two face archiving methods that began to spread in the late nineteenth century in scientific and forensic discourses, namely, Francis Galton's *composite portrait*[7] and the *portrait parleé* of the French police officer Alphonse Bertillon,[8] developed to identify, in the context of what would later become the media society, genetic and criminal deviances. In this regard, it may not be inappropriate to acknowledge that the media society has produced an epoch-making impact on the visual representation and reproduction of identity and, therefore, of otherness. This shift has resulted in the unbridled production of facial icons: the faces of propaganda, the faces of celebrities, the faces of the oppressors, and the faces of the oppressed. As suggested by Thomas Macho (1996), the modern *facial society* emerged from the diffusion of media representations that would take the humanized presence away from the face by detaching perceptive habits, eliminating local physiognomies, and affirming icons.

The phenomenon of the dissemination of facial icons is also at the center of one of the chapters of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). In the essay, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose considering the fortune of the icon of the human face in Western culture as a biopolitical heritage. The authors recognize in Christian Europe an *abstract machine* that projects its power onto the face: *faciality*. This machine does not function to represent a particular token of humanity but rather to construct a type of human. Deleuze and Guattari assert that certain sociocultural apparatuses need the abstract machine of faciality to be effective and to construct a reality through the configuration of a specific face-type. As they write:

> The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code – when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be *overcoded* by something we shall call the Face.
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> ([1980b] 2005: 170, italics in the original)

The term "overcoded," used by the authors since *The Anti-Oedipus* (1972), indicates a second-level coding process, a codification operated by a language capable of assigning new expressive codes. Concerning the abstract machine of faciality, this overcoding operates for the benefit of a semiotics

of subjectivation where the polyvocal corporeal code is minimized and materialized in a specific biopolitical environment. This faciality codifies the message of the precariousness of humanity through expressive values that commute the vulnerability of life into a type, as in the iconic faces represented on coins that signify the commutation of a peculiar human-type into a value. In this sense, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the abstract machine of faciality is by no means universal but is what emerges from the forms of expression of the type of the white man, from his development that originates with the iconic face of Christ, with the coding that makes it possible to produce all the coherent units of the face and all the rejections of deviation, all that is proper and improper.

The process of iconization within Western visual culture is also at the core of *Face and Mask: A Double History* (2013) by Hans Belting. In his book, the result of years of investigations, the art historian questions the common Western approach that idealizes the authenticity of the face while discrediting the mask as an illusion. On the contrary, from his viewpoint, both the face and the mask can be understood as images that manifest themselves through certain artifacts which have become visible thanks to an iconic figuration. Belting's research starts from the recognition of a very complex plot that links the face and the mask as two phenomena expressed in many cultural histories, such as the history of art, the history of scientific representations, and the history of media. His main hypothesis can be thus resumed: since antiquity, Western culture has made the human face into a semantic-expressive form that has assumed the social figuration of the mask. From this standpoint, Belting proposes a consideration of the genre of portraiture, and particularly portraits from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, as well as the European mask itself. Like masks, portraits are characterized by a certain compactness and durability (Dondero 2020a), while they raise a series of questions about the design of visual identity. Belting's thesis opens up a whole series of very rich reflections, first of all on the bio-cultural criteria of relevance and selection of the effects of resemblance.

Although today we tend to regard portraits as symbolic works of art, they were once artifacts that fulfilled certain social functions, ranging from being commodities of exchange to inherited goods, from objects of social affirmation to heirlooms. In this sense, already from the Renaissance on, portraits were widespread insofar as they served a proxy function – namely, in circumstances where the person depicted was absent but still wanted to assert his or her presence. Particularly in Flemish portraiture, it is possible to notice the transition from the depiction of a presence to the artifact existence of a portable object, a painted panel, which endowed the subject of the portrait with a symbolic presence and related state of

rights or authority. As pointed out by Belting, the European portrait can be considered a particular type of mask since it can replace the face with an icon. It presents the resembling face as a sign that invites the viewer to communicate with it. Portraits show the necessity of the sociocultural face to be represented; thus, in addition to the physiognomy that revealed the uniqueness of the person, they revealed the codified mask with which the person sought to assert his or her position in the social context.

Building upon the lessons of Macho, Deleuze, Guattari, and Belting, to comprehend the spread of facial images in our iconosphere, it becomes pivotal to understand its iconic nature. Once more, the philosophical proposals of Peirce can be of help to us. In *An Elementary Account of the Logic of Relatives*, Peirce writes (1886):

> The icon represents its object by virtue of resembling it. It thus depends upon simple feeling. Mental association has nothing to do with it. The icon has no generality, because it does not analyze the character it exhibits. There is thus no more generality in the icon than there is in its object. Nor has the icon anything to do with the sense of contact with the world, nor with the actual existence of its object. It is a mere dream. Icons comprehend all pictures, imitations, diagrams, and examples.
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> (MS 585: 380)

According to Peirce, the icon entails a relationship with a referent that may very well not exist. This relationship is not general but concerns a precise object because it does not pass through conceptual meanings. The representation of a human face in a picture, for example, will have a certain type of hair or a particular nose. These objects are generated by the iconic signs that activate them: even when we know that an image is impossible, as in the case of pareidolia,[9] we can still see it as a representation based on the functioning of our perceptions. Neurophysiological and cognitive research suggests, in fact, that humans are biologically predisposed to recognizing visual matrices with meaning in reality and, what is more, to believing that they emanate an intentional agency. Pareidolia confirms this perspective: our neurophysiology drives us to recognize communicative images so insistently that we sometimes identify them even though these images do not result from any intentionality.

Within this perspective we can say, as Umberto Eco affirms in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), that the iconic sign does not have the same physical properties as the referent but stimulates a perceptual structure like that which would be stimulated by the referent. Thus, recovering Peirce's proposals through Eco's lesson implies being able, firstly, to identify what resemblance the icon stimulates and, secondly, to analyze how these iconic

stimuli operate in the production of habits. As in the faces of war observed by Butler, the facial icons prompt synecdochic forms of communication that intervene directly in the perception of otherness: those iconic faces are the war itself.

From the conflict in Afghanistan to the present day, artificial intelligence systems have played an increasingly prominent role in every domain of our lives. In this respect, there is a thin red line connecting technological developments, particularly those related to the visual realm, with the demands of war. As I write, after all, the media are announcing the news that the use of facial recognition systems is ongoing in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, a novelty that makes me ask: what sense of otherness can be communicated in those facial images?

4. Interpreting the para-faciality of otherness

Every epoch disposes of several apparatuses that configure ways of seeing capable of shaping the perception of otherness. For example, the works of Susan Sontag (1977), Teresa de Lauretis (1987), and Jonathan Crary (1990), among many others, have exhaustively analyzed the specificity of the optic apparatus in modeling modern and postmodern society. Today, in times when the progressive reconstruction of reality based on a binary standardization is re-ontologizing our world, new habits arise. The circulation and diffusion of technologies like software for facial recognition, the creation and establishment of digital portraitures such as visual filters in social networking, and the diffusion of dematerialized approaches to storage such as visual big data or the act of scrolling in dating apps, change the ways of performing, and thus of understanding, the processes of identification. A proposal for framing the complexity of the phenomenon is to imagine a genealogical trajectory that, from the Renaissance development of geometrical perspective as a mathematical eye based on a statistical code that translates the complexity of the world into discrete elements (Maldonado 1974; Friedberg 2004), leads up to the present. We can identify a watershed in this genealogy in the diffusion of the mechanical model (Maria Tortajada and François Albera 2010) between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a sociocultural process that opened a series of propositions on the models of apprehension, particularly according to the concept of division into discrete units that can be combined. The legacy of this model is still present in our contemporary media ecology, as a meaning-effect in the discourses and practices that cross it. Nevertheless, this is an environment where the intelligibility of the modes of information, technologies, and codes of communication is driven by both human and artificial agencies, an ecology where the units to be combined are both flesh and bits.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, John Johnston (1999: 27) analyzes the contemporary media ecology in terms of *machinic vision*[10]: "not only an environment of interacting machines and human-machine systems but a field of decoded perception that, whether or not produced by or issuing from these machines, assume their full intelligibility only in relation to them". Within this same perspective, Paul Virilio has referred to it as the *vision machine*, that is, "the possibility of achieving sightless vision" (Virilio 1994: 59), a vision that recognizes shapes and combines them through synthetic and discrete data. In more recent times, Trevor Paglen has described the artificial visuality diffuse in our media ecology in terms of "invisible images" (2016), referring to the flow of visual data produced by machines and used within human-machine interaction. This is what the video artist Harun Farocki, in his series *Eye/Machine I-III* (2001–2003), named operational images: images that do not resemble or depict a referent but are part of complex processes such as detecting, identifying, visualizing, tracking, navigating, and so on. In addition, as a sorrowful bench test of their efficacy in communicating the sense of otherness, we can see how operational images are increasingly central in warfare, for example, in the functioning of military devices such as drones. Unlike the images of precariousness, on their surface, human precarity is blurred and, therefore, so is the sense of vulnerability. There seems to be no room for empathy in the operational image because there is no room for the communication of humanity, only efficiency and the fulfillment of tasks. We can signal a paradigmatic shift defining the phenomenology of otherness within these images: they modify their proxy function, being no longer linked to the impression of resemblance but to the simulation of the quantity of data stored in them. This shift is part of a wider biopolitical process that interweaves the contemporary diffusion of automated images with specific rhetorics.

We can identify in the artificial way of seeing that takes possession of the embodied dimension of the face and turns it into an intelligible tool for recognition, an omnipresent and omni-significant *para-faciality*, an inchoative process of identification always ready to be processed and fulfilled. From this standpoint, it is possible to affirm that automated facial images allow for the detection and identification of recurring para-facial *surface effects*, digital matrices that contain the expected metrics of facial features. They result from the *interface effect* of the artificial face concerning the required data necessary to model and simulate what can be recognized as human. These para-facialities emerge from algorithmic gestures that designate a technology that no longer reflects a *techné* but becomes an executing actant capable of revealing identity according to a differential *meta-face effect*.

These gestures of artificial revelation are part of a wider algorithmizing process, a para-modelized procedure whereby artificial intelligence systems

not only govern the logic of computing but, more generally, have become the agents that model and reveal, by simulating, our reality. Biology, genetics, engineering, forensics, and many more areas of our lives today use algorithms that perform evolution, growth, adaptation, and change of data while they provide "a body that can be read and a body that is of use in virtue of its ability to produce information" (Lee-Morrison 2019: 46). At the same time, these algorithms teach other algorithms how to operate: they have ceased to be constative instructions and have become entities that perform, insofar as they select, evaluate, and transform; they produce ways of life and, of course, ways of seeing otherness:

> Algorithms learn: they adapt, adjust and evolve their behavior according to a qualitative synthesis of vast quantities of data. Their performative activity is afforded by their capacity to compress large quantities of information and thus transform outputs into new inputs, involving a new synthesis of reasoning and calculation. Here data do not have to fit categories but are redefinable in the manner in which algorithms generate possible rules, causes and facts where these are missing.
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> (Parisi 2019: 94)

Artificial intelligence's algorithms, thus, are no longer just simulators of data dynamics since they have acquired a new status that is not related to the preexistence of biophysical matter. They do not just represent our reality by capturing, detecting, or recognizing objects but are performing entities that expose the inconsistency of the proliferation of increasingly random and biased data within our societies. In this regard, the performative functioning of algorithms in designing facial images reveals how the degree of prehension proper to this artificial revelation has come to characterize the representation of otherness. Rephrasing a common cliché, it is possible to affirm that bias is neither a bug nor a feature but is a meaning effect.

Within this framework, the current spread of digital para-facialities redefines certain practices that have characterized Western societies since time immemorial, such as those of the recognition and analysis of a face. The codification and, thus, the decodification of the face are historically determined – to this day and in most cultures – by precise aesthetic, normative models, and biopolitical conditions. It should therefore come as no surprise that nonhuman-produced facial images have always been recognized as possessing a special aura capable of attributing extraordinary powers; they are images endowed with an absolute authenticity that determines an unmediated interpretation. This is why long-standing traditions concerning facial images produced by nonhuman agencies, such as the so-called

acheiropoieta images which intersect the history of visual cultures from East to West and North to South, can be useful for framing our topic:

> Since the face is so central in human behavior, facial images that are considered as produced by a non-human agency receive a special aura throughout history and cultures, as if they were endowed with extraordinary powers. Furthermore, since in many societies the face is read as the most important manifestation of interiority, "non-man-made" images of faces are attributed a status of authenticity and earnestness, as if they were the sincerest expression of some otherwise invisible agencies.
>
> (Leone 2021b "Prefazione": 17)

This auratic understanding of automated facial images continues to this day, generating a particular process of legitimation to which artificial intelligence has been recently subjected: an aletheic power (Sadin 2018). Today, facial images produced by artificial intelligence systems seem to be endowed with the extraordinary power not only to compare natural and artificial intelligence but also to attribute a status of authenticity to images based on an automated inference that quantifies the bodies and, thus, the sociocultural process of identification and construction of otherness. Indeed, this state of authenticity seems to rewrite the forms through which we relate to reality, the ways in which we experience the world around us and, above all, the rhetorics of verisimilitude. Immersed in an iconosphere where the immediacy of data produces a very strong sense of presence, where objects become hyper-real and, above all, where an aletheic impression of reality seems to permeate everything by means of a hyper-stimulated visual regime, which images are to be believed? And above all, which facial images will still be able to communicate the precariousness of otherness?

To answer this question, I propose in what follows the analysis of an artistic presentation, the video *Face Scripting: What Did the Building See?* produced in 2011 as part of the investigations of the multidisciplinary group known as Forensic Architecture, based at Goldsmiths, University of London.

4.1. The para-faciality of otherness and its uncertainty

In January 2012, Mahmoud al-Mahbouh, an official belonging to Hamas – an acronym that stands for Islamic Resistance Movement, the political-religious organization whose goal is to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation to establish a religious state there – was killed in a hotel in Dubai. A month after the killing of the official, the police of the United Arab Emirates published a video, still available on YouTube, where through an

operation of remixing and recomposing images extrapolated from video surveillance circuits of airports, hotels, and shopping centers, the aletheic agency of the artificial gaze is staged. This is a gaze that encodes a specific way of seeing; that is, it encourages us to trace in the succession of images that make up the video a legible, and plausible, crime scene. This rhetorical effect finds its essence in the verdictive nature of the images of the video surveillance circuits, in their clinical precision ready to guarantee total adherence to reality thanks to the aletheic power of the facial recognition software used to analyze those recorded images. In just under thirty minutes of images, the reel released by the Dubai police attributes the murder of Mahmoud al-Mahbouh to agents of Mossad, that is, the intelligence agency of the State of Israel, focused on foreign operations. Once posted on the YouTube platform, this video became a real agent, part of the crime scene. And it is precisely thanks to the recognition of a widespread para-faciality in the spaces examined, a latent figure always ready to communicate an identification process, that the police tried to identify the faces of the murder suspects in the crowd.

However, the video cannot be classified as a document, as the trace or the evidence of a crime but as the montage of a series of possible scenarios and faces. In fact, during its scant 30 minutes we witness a mise en scene where, through the result of the intersection of a narrative flow between spaces and faces, between architecture and face images, the faces of the suspects and the suspicious become latent surfaces of criminality, an *interface effect* that reduces the *meta-effect* of those faces to the verification of a crime scene. They are faces, after all, that are denied any possibility of grasping human infinity because of the way the mechanisms of the gaze are positioned: video surveillance cameras deny the possibility of looking back, emphasizing strongly asymmetrical power relations.

In a sort of digital update of the *portrait parlé* techniques by Bertillon, the Emirati police extracted a whole series of data from the *surface effect* played out by the images captured by video surveillance circuits, such as the relation of forehead to hairline, the relation of nose width to eyes, and the relation of jaws to cheeks. To rewrite the crime scene, each moment of encounter between Mossad agents or between the agents and unidentified persons provides the surveillance scanning algorithm with a possible line of investigation. This line is disentangled from the impression left by the *interface effect* which, thanks to the material actualization of otherness, follows new faces in the crowd to meet other suspects. The *para-faciality* to which the media ecology of our digital contemporaneity is accustoming us eventually allows the inchoative opening of new avenues of investigation, bifurcations that could continue *ad infinitum*, because every time the identified agents meet colleagues in Dubai or in any other country, other

agents will also be identified due to a particular *meta-face effect*: these faces stage intransitive dominant forms of communicating otherness while communicating quantified data concerning what can be understood as a precise human-type, the suspicious.

The collaborative video *Face Scripting: What Did the Building See?* co-made by Shumon Basar (writer, editor, and curator), Jane & Louise Wilson (an artistic duo engaged for years in audiovisual and installation works), and Eyal Weizman (founder and director of the research group *Forensic Architecture*), reflects precisely on the veridical rhetoric of para-faciality in the age of algorithmic reproducibility. It is part of the investigations realized by *Forensic Architecture* a group, founded in 2010, which develops its work in the field of historical, theoretical, and artistic research starting from a re-appropriation of contemporary forensic practices to critically evaluate their epistemologies, protocols, and knowledge production policies. *Forensic Architecture* practice starts from a deep and sensitive understanding of the two fundamental aspects of every forensic investigation: the field and the forum. Central to their practice is, thus, a focus on what we can define in terms of a material investigation, that is, research that seeks to bypass human testimony in favor of the material findings that can be brought to the forum by making the matter a political agent. As in all research developed by this group, it is the *forensic turn* on the space of the visible that is at the center of *Face Scripting: What Did the Building See?*

At the very beginning of the video the voice-off defines the piece as "a narrative assembled by an algorithmic forensic based on the architecture of the human face", the design which describes *surface effect* through the taxonomies of eyes, noses, forehead, mouth, and the distance between them. Then it continues: "algorithms identify individuals by extracting and analyzing landmarks from the images of the face". Using the theoretical system built up throughout these pages, we can erect an analogical bridge between the image of the landmark and the *interface effect*, always primed for the inchoative process of identification to occur, the face being central for the recognition of what is suspicious. While the voice frames the narrative, the filmic enunciation guides us through a free indirect discourse where we witness the undecidability of the point of view on subjectivity: we glimpse a screen, the reflected image of which alerts us to the possibility of a gaze that is absent but nevertheless ready to grasp its contents; the revolving door of a hotel entrance observed at human height without, however, a body passing through it; a journey from the bottom to the top, almost simulating an absent face gazing upward at the ceiling with its nose in the air, along what appears to be the corridor of a luxury hotel. We are faced with the impossibility of assigning an identity, a putting into perspective that is totally antithetical to the rhetoric of hyper-visibility enacted in the video released by the Dubai police. In the video *Face Scripting: What Did the*

Building See? it is through the material dimension, through its situated signification that an attempt is made to make sense of – and be sensitive to – what has been considered a simple thing. It is the walls of large shopping malls and luxury hotels, the spatialities made up of corridors, and buildings whose interstices are not completely reachable by the watchful gaze of security cameras that are the protagonists, with their affordances and usage programs. Restarting from the material dimension means, then, putting the connections between human and nonhuman, between the artificial eye and the embedded dimension of perception, back in the center of the frame. It means bringing back into the limelight the efficacy of models, simulative and interpretive, made of flesh and bits, those which hopefully may allow for some uncertainty in the process of subjectification with which to counteract – or at least assign an out-of-frame to – the inchoative nature of digital para-faciality.

5. Conclusions

Throughout these pages, I have aimed to encompass how, in the contemporary iconosphere, facial images *do things* while taking into consideration differential perspectives of communicating otherness: from the circulation and use of facial icons to the mutability of facial formats and the biopolitical implications of the storage of large volumes of data regarding faces. Furthermore, observing the implementation of technologies capable of automating perceptual models, I have framed a differential understanding of contemporary ways of seeing and communicating otherness in terms of para-faciality. All these phenomena raise new questions concerning the processes of quantification used for the representation and recognition of otherness in a cultural context in which an increasing number of images are produced and consumed not only by humans but also by machines. To think that otherness can happen *through* the production of automated facial images allows a material turn to be applied to the medium itself. In this regard, if the term "media" can be used to refer to an established and institutionalized communicational environment, then conversely, by using the word "medium" we can refer to the net of material components that produce the uncertainty of images. On this matter, I have referred to the artificial representation of the human face as a sociocultural set of visual techno-ideologies produced by always-situated facial effects that allow differential forms of communicating otherness. This switch from media to medium has also permitted considering the scopic regime that produces and enables facial images, the dynamics associated with the mechanisms of visibility and knowability of social bodies and, of course, of social faces. At the same time, my inquiry into the scopic regime that defines portraiture has focused on the analytical effectiveness of visual and semiotics studies as

productive theoretical instruments for reading the present and for developing strategies useful for untangling cultural complexity, even in contemporary warfare.

Notes

1 This chapter results from a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant Agreement No 819649-FACETS; PI: Massimo LEONE).

2 "The first comprises the qualities of phenomena, such as red, bitter, tedious, hard, heartrending, noble; and there are doubtless manifold varieties utterly unknown to us. [. . .] It is sufficient that wherever there is a phenomenon there is a quality; so that it might almost seem that there is nothing else in phenomena. The qualities merge into one another. They have no perfect identities, but only likenesses, or partial identities. Some of them, such as the colors and the musical sounds, form well-understood systems. Probably, were our experience of them not so fragmentary, there would be no abrupt demarcations between them, at all. Still, each one is what it is in itself without help from the others. They are single but partial determinations."

3 "The second category of elements of phenomena comprises the actual facts. The qualities, in so far as they are general, are somewhat vague and potential. But an occurrence is perfectly individual. It happens here and now. A permanent fact is less purely individual; yet so far as it is actual, its permanence and generality only consist in its being there at every individual instant. Qualities are concerned in facts but they do not make up facts. Facts also concern subjects which are material substances. We do not see them as we see qualities, that is, they are not in the very potentiality and essence of sense. But we feel facts resist our will. That is why facts are proverbially called brutal. Now mere qualities do not resist. It is the matter that resists."

4 "The third category of elements of phenomena consists of what we call laws when we contemplate them from the outside only, but which when we see both sides of the shield we call thoughts. Thoughts are neither qualities nor facts. They are not qualities because they can be produced and grow, while a quality is eternal, independent of time and of any realization. Besides, thoughts may have reasons, and indeed, must have some reasons, good or bad. But to ask why a quality is as it is, why red is red and not green, would be lunacy. If red were green it would not be red; that is all. And any semblance of sanity the question may have is due to its being not exactly a question about quality, but about the relation between two qualities, though even this is absurd. A thought then is not a quality. No more is it a fact. For a thought is general. I had it. I imparted it to you. It is general on that side. It is also general in referring to all possible things, and not merely to those which happen to exist."

5 "Let us use the word habit . . . not in its narrower, and more proper sense, in which it is opposed to a natural disposition (for the term acquired habit will perfectly express that narrower sense), but in its wider and perhaps still more usual sense, in which it denotes such a specialization, original or acquired, of the nature of a man, or an animal, or a vine, or a crystallizable chemical substance, or anything else, that he or it will behave, or always tend to behave, in a way describable in general terms upon every occasion (or upon a considerable

proportion of the occasions) that may present itself of a generally describable character."

6 After September 2001, Paul Ekman's theories became very popular in US culture and in other disciplinary fields besides psychology. Ekman's laboratory approach promised to make others' emotions truthful and unambiguous regardless of the awareness of the person who was experiencing those emotions. In this regard, Jan Plamper (2015) indicates ideological parallelism between Ekman's approach and the logic of political national security that spread after the fall of the Twin Towers. In the laboratory, the certainty of the analysis is the result of the specific epistemology of experimental psychology which is the reduction of the reality of certain dependent and/or independent variables. This reduction cannot be reproduced in the real world.

7 Developed in the 1880s, the composite portrait creates the criminal type from the statistical averages of the anthropometry of the face according to essentialist biometrics. The starting point of the composite photograph is a repetition of shooting and assembling acts that function as a promise against the variance of human conditions. Galton believed that he had translated the Gaussian curve into the pictorial image which wires a human face (cfr. Sekula 1986; Lee-Morrison 2019).

8 For Bertillon, the mastery of the criminal body necessitated a massive campaign of inscription, a transformation of the faces into texts that pared verbal description down to a denotative shorthand, which was then linked to a numerical series. Firstly, he combined photographic portraiture, anthropometric description, and highly standardized and abbreviated written notes on a single fiche. Secondly, he organized these cards within a comprehensive, statistically based filing system. Bertillon would go on to hone his system of physical description into a morphological vocabulary to describe the variability of human features, as well as a system of abbreviations to render that vocabulary communicable by telegraph.

9 Pareidolia is a perceptual illusion that allows the recognition of figures endowed with meaning, faces in most cases, in plastic configurations where this meaning has not been introduced by any human intentionality. From a biological point of view, pareidolia is the result of a long perceptual process linked to the survival of the human species through which the recognition of hostile faces in the environment is fundamental.

10 Johnston borrowed the term "machinic" from *A Thousand Plateaus*. In their essays, Deleuze and Guattari oppose the machinic on the one hand to the mechanical, which applies to the machine as a functional unity of discrete but homogeneous parts and on the other to the organic, which applies to the organism as a hierarchical organization of biological organs. Where bodies and machines enter into machinic relationships, that is, become parts of an assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish two opposing processes: the decoding or deterritorialization where a functional equilibrium gives way to movements of change and becoming, and the opposite side of the assemblage where there are processes of stratification or reterritorialization.