11. Envisaging the city: roadmap for an interdisciplinary study of urban 'facescapes'

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1   INTRODUCTION: URBAN FACETS

'How can I not know today your face tomorrow, the one that is there already or is being forged beneath the face you show me or beneath the mask you are wearing, and which you will only show me when I am least expecting it?',[1] acclaimed Spanish writer Javier Marías wonders in the first volume of the monumental novel *Tu rostro mañana* (*Your face tomorrow*), whose central theme is betrayal, as well as the relationship between face, foreboding and knowledge: evil, when it arrives, arrives with a face that we had already intuited under its mask, but that we had instinctively chosen not to perceive consciously, as though obeying a supreme imperative according to which it would be atrocious to live with the deep certainty of what the face hides. The same could be asked about cities: Could we survive in a city, for example in one of the cities that we visit as tourists, if we knew what is hidden under their masks? Those which they don at every step, either spontaneously or – and such is the case of the most visited cities in the world – because their faces have been carefully made up in order to convey an image, as urban marketing would say, but also, as the quote by Javier Marías suggests, in order to hide their true faces, or at least some of their deep layers? Those that, under the masks, are presented to the tourist, to the traveller, to the business professional, layers where a bitter and treacherous truth is often hidden?

Talking about the face of a city is a fruitful metaphor, since it allows one to distinguish between the project of a planned and conscious visibility and the underground tingling of deep and painful features, hidden by the brushstrokes of urban makeup. The pimples, the wrinkles, the dark circles of a city do not appear to the distracted visitor, the one who is carried away by the illusion of a superficial splendour, and only emerge as almost imperceptible signs, for perceiving and interpreting which one needs a sharp and sceptical look,

a knowledge that observes the city underneath its superficial face. It is necessary to ask, with a methodology that is born of pure qualitative experience but aspires to become systematic, what are the faces with which a city presents itself, and what is the meaning that can be detected under its smile, the universal currency whereby global cities around the world now welcome travellers and tourists and, above all, welcome that capital which, thanks to them, moves around the world.

2   ROADMAP AND STATE OF THE ART

The chapter that follows intends to propose a roadmap for the interdisciplinary study of the face and facial representations in urban contexts, having semiotics as the main methodological framework. There is a long tradition of semiotic studies on the city, a tradition that is so abundant as to give rise to a branch of the discipline (tentatively called 'urban semiotics'); also, the semiotic bibliography on faces and facial representations is growing, mainly as a consequence of the European Research Council project FACETS.[2] Publications that combine these two foci, however, are still few, so that further inquiry is needed into this important aspect of the meaning of both cities and faces: what are the typical significations of faces in urban contexts? And, vice versa, how is the meaning of cities changed and inflected by faces and facial representations? The proposed roadmap consists of four sections, each dedicated to a different facet of the facial presence in urban contexts: 'Faces in the city' concentrates on the need to study the presentation and representation of faces in city settings; 'Faces around the city' points at the new semiotic assemblages created by the presence of machinic face observation devices and, therefore, recognition agents in urban dwellings; 'Faces on the city' refers to old and new practices of 'face inscription' on urban surfaces; and 'Faces of the city' explores the metaphor of cities as organisms endowed with individual faces.

Among significant contributions in the field, one should mention the collection of essays *Semiotic landscapes: Language, image, space* (Jaworski and Thurlow 2011), which looks at how landscape generates meaning and explicitly refers to architectural faces in the chapter 'Faces of places: Façades as global communication in post-Eastern Bloc urban renewal (Gendelman and Aiello 2011); in resonance with Section 4 of the present roadmap, the authors perspicaciously posit:

> We start from the straightforward premise that façades are important discursive spaces. Commonly defined as the 'face' or outward appearance of a building, façades are typically decorated with ornamental or architectural detail that distinguishes them from the other sides of a building … While it is the case that a façade is designed intentionally to communicate a particular message, it is also a text that conglomerates across time and through genres which may include but are often

beyond the intent of the architect. In this way, the façade is a communicative event that tells stories through its changing materiality, representing the building and its contents, but also the particular ideologies and power dynamics of the city in relation to its inhabitants and broader economic and political processes. (Gendelman and Aiello 2011, p. 256)

Equally significant is the more recent collection of essays *Worldmaking: Literature, language, culture* (Clark and Finlay 2017), which starts from the term and concept of 'worldmaking', formulated by Nelson Goodman, so as to underline that 'world versions' – descriptions, views or workings of the world – are expressed in symbolic systems (words, music, dancing, visual representations): 'worlds comprise the significances we attribute to materiality and the communications such significances engender' (Goodman 1978, p. 3). Analogously, faces and facial representations contribute to a dynamic of 'city-making', shaping alternative versions of urban meaning. These include, for instance, faces of characters in movies set in particular cities, which add to the emotional tone by which they are globally perceived (see, in the abovementioned collection, the essay 'The sadness of the city: Reflections on Shanghai and Istanbul' (Cain 2017)).

Another collection of essays, *Diversity and super-diversity: Sociocultural linguistic perspectives* (De Fina et al. 2017) also builds on a sociolinguistic framework so as to include consideration for non-verbal systems of signs that contribute to the 'superdiversity' of contemporary global settings, and especially to the semiotic variety of cities. This superdiversity now typically comprises also faces and facial representations, which add to the impression of complexity that these semiotic scenarios evoke. The first chapter, in particular, 'Chronotopic identities: On the timespace organization of who we are' (Blommaert and De Fina 2017), points at the importance of considering the complex semiotic meshes that shape the chronotopes of contemporary city lives, which include not only verbal expressions but also other semiotic elements, such as faces and their behaviours; in particular, authors:

intend to illustrate how a view of identities as chronotopic can offer invaluable insights into the complexities of identity issues in super-diverse social environments, and how it fits within a renewed sociolinguistic paradigm that stresses ethnographic, practice-oriented approaches to communication and discourse, aimed at the most minute aspects of identity practices operating as indexicals for large-scale 'structuring' characteristics of social practice – a nano-politics of identity so to speak. (Blommaert and De Fina 2017, p. 1)

This approach resonates with the perspective embraced by a recent FACETS seminar, 'Chronotopes of the face', whose intent was exactly that of applying

Bachtin's conceptual tool to the study of faces in their spatial and temporal contexts (Soro et al. 2022).

3   FACES IN THE CITY

Multiple relations hold between the face and the city. First, cities are populated by the biological faces of their inhabitants. These faces contribute to the visual, ethnic and social landscape of the city with their somatic features and cultural connotations, including hair and facial hair style, clothing (hats, veils, masks, etc.), tattoos, piercings, scarifications, make-up, jewellery, plastic surgery, etc. (Mubi Brighenti 2019, p. 22). Somatic features, moreover, are often sociocul-turally inflected (skin pigmentation and health conditions, dentistry, tanning, skin whitening, etc.). Also, some facial expressions, like smiling to outsiders, might be characteristically more or less present in a certain city, part of what Martina Löw (2012) describes as its 'intrinsic logic', or at a certain stage of a city's history (see Colin Jones's delightful history of the 'smile revolution' in eighteenth-century Paris (Jones 2014); see also Sharrona Pearl's chapter 'Pocket physiognomy: Sense in the city', in Pearl (2010) and Percival and Tytler (2005) on the late modern 'physiognomy frenzy' in European cities). A city's 'facial landscape' is therefore characterised by concentration and visi-bility of specific face types throughout the city. The history of visual cultures is replete with folk typologies, which nevertheless have often left fleeting traces in culture, whence the difficulty to develop a systematic study of them (for a pioneering attempt, see Zanardi and Klich 2018).[3]

As people make sense of faces on the street, cognition processes often project forms of difference or familiarity: in ethnically plural urban land-scapes, for instance, concentration of somatic features in certain areas or neighbourhoods signify – to both internal and external beholders – their facial characterisation, as well as a whole series of interpretations stemming from it. A city or one of its neighbourhoods manifest themselves not only through a certain architectural and urban style, but also through the constellation of faces of people living in the neighbourhood, heterogenous ensembles, echoing diverse backgrounds.

Preconceptions and prejudices attached to a given urban area stem also from its prevailing 'facial tone', meaning the kinds of face that are commonly visible therein. Anecdotal experience signals that some cities and urban areas, like the centres of Western metropolises, are characterised by a high degree of facial diversity, whereas smaller cities or peripheral areas show greater homogeneity, to the point that, to an external and unfamiliar observer, it might seem as though 'people in this city look all the same'. Urban facial style perceptions can therefore reinforce feelings of belonging ('people's faces all around look familiar') or, on the contrary, intensify estrangement ('nobody

looks like me'), give rise to increased social cohesion or, on the opposite side, encourage discrimination (Leone 2012). As Deleuze and Guattari (1980) prominently suggest, the face is also a device of visual normativity, through which supposed anomalies are immediately perceived and often stigmatised. Literature on the face as well as on urban discrimination has neglected to apply this concept to the facial landscape of cities. It is through the intrinsic normativity of face perception, indeed, that the city often confirms hegemonic asymmetries in its sociocultural and visual structure, to the detriment of faces (and people) and spaces: on the one hand, an uncommon face is immediately perceived as a foreign body in a city or in a neighbourhood; on the other hand, entire cities or neighbourhoods are discriminated against because of their pre-dominant 'facial tone'. The faces of minorities are usually the object of such discrimination: women in urban areas that are thought of as exclusively for men (like traditional villages or towns around the Mediterranean); religious or ethnic attire that is considered unfit for a city or neighbourhood (like various types of Islamic veils in predominantly non-Muslim cities); facial pigmen-tation perceived as uncommon or even unwanted (like in all urban racisms). The social stigma on the faces of minorities also relates to the opposite 'face of power', for instance when institutions and law enforcement agents predom-inantly show somatic characteristics that are at odds with those that prevail in the urban area that they control. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has added an extra dimension to the complexity of the urban 'face landscape', with the requirement, often contested, of wearing a protective face mask in the urban public space or in certain areas of it (Leone 2020a).

In relation to this first subject of investigation, what is sorely needed is a critical survey of the presence of faces in the visual landscapes of cities as well as its consequences in terms of ethnic and sociocultural relations. The issue is to be problematised not only in the frame of traditional urban and face studies, spanning from geography to semiotics, from sociology to visual studies, but also in the new frame of big data visualisation and analysis. The massive presence of cameras in many urban environments, together with exponential improvement in the technology of automated facial perception and recognition, now allow the researcher to plan an automatic or semi-automatic study of facial distribution within the urban landscape (Manovich and Tifentale 2015) as well as the 'memorability' of faces (Bainbridge et al. 2013). Despite the technical and ethical difficulties of collecting such datasets, their labelling could prove enormously precious for social sciences and humanities (in relation to the COVID-19 emergency, for instance, it could lead to an estimate of how the wearing of the mask statistically varies across the different neighbourhoods of a city and gives policy makers indications on where and how to concentrate their efforts so as to increase the adoption of this contested but, according to most scientific reports, useful medical device).

4   FACES AROUND THE CITY

As the abovementioned methodological suggestion indicates, human faces in the city are increasingly visible not only to other human beings, but also to various kinds of devices. In principle, all camera-like technology is able to capture digital images of faces in the city. The combination of these devices with artificial intelligence has enabled automated facial recognition technology on a large urban scale. Computer vision increasingly resembles the physiology of human vision; as Lee puts it: 'The truth is: these two devices convert the incoming light into electrical signals ultimately. The only difference is that in the human visual system, electrical flows are conducted via our visual nerves to the visual cortex inside our brain' (Lee 2020, pp. 124–125). Moreover, the introduction of deep learning in artificial intelligence now leads to the possibility of associating massive automated face detection and recognition in the city with the opportunity to automatically extract information from such datasets. Increasingly sophisticated algorithms are proposed to automatically predict, from digital images of faces, various kinds of citizens' attitudes and inclinations, including some sensitive ones (like sexual orientation, for instance) (Leone 2020b). The rapid diffusion of this urban facial technology is problematic and deserves investigation from many points of view. Common devices like the omnipresent smartphone now allow one to digitally capture one's face and, in many circumstances, the faces of others both in pictures and in videos, to edit them and to circulate them through the Internet and especially social networks. Urban facial landscapes are more and more not only physical – composed by biological faces – but also virtual, woven by digital images of faces that, through complex assemblages, constitute the online facial imaginary of a city; investigations on the geo-localisation of facial digital images are booming, but the subject still lacks a systematic survey (Leone 2020c). What is at stake is not only the task of characterising the virtual projection of the urban 'facescape', but also the ways in which this projection becomes the occasion for a new series of intermediations, biases, unbalances and exploitations (Kappelhoff et al. 2001). As Martyn Jolly suggests, 'The abstraction, delamination and mobilisation of the face have led to its reification. The face is closing down on the sense of openly mutual obligation that, in Levinas's terms, once arose when one face faced another, and is replacing it with a sense of commercial enclosure' (Jolly 2015, p. 154). Exploring this new domain is all the more urgent as pervasive digital technologies of representation constantly feed, on the contrary, a rhetoric of disintermediation and spontaneity. This area includes crucial contemporary issues, like the relation between digital face (self-)representations and social conditions (including gender) (Losh 2015) and unbalances between face observers and observed faces, with the related

issue of the marketing of face 'authenticity' in tourism and other ventures of digital commodification of the facial imagery. New facial technologies, however, also represent a complex but fascinating opportunity for remodelling social research about the presence of faces in urban space, for instance, to develop new investigations about the meaning of bodies and their orientations in particular settings, such as museums (see McMurtrie 2016, in particular the chapter 'Framing and reframing exhibition space: Viewing stations, isoglosses and facial orientation).

The creation of digital facial assemblages in urban settings is even more problematic when it is carried out in a systematic or semi-systematic way, through security cameras and automatic face detection/recognition/analysis. The systematic use of this technology by institutional or corporate entities is the object of one of the most heated present-day controversies, in ethical, political and legal terms. Phenomena of protest and resistance against the systematic monitoring of faces in the city are also rampant, including artistic provocations and technological counter-inventions (Leone 2020d). As this technology for the digital capture and intelligence of the face is progressively miniaturised, however, to the point that it becomes embedded in common smartphones, the issue of the relation between power and urban facescapes increasingly involves the possible abuses of law enforcement and corporate data mining towards citizens, as well as counteractions of the latter against established urban powers; at the time of writing, a controversial French project of law aims at making it illegal for smartphone-owning citizens, including also not clearly identifiable journalists, to record images of law enforcement agents' faces.

5   FACES ON THE CITY

Cities are composed by biological faces and by their virtual projections, but digital images of faces are not the only facial representations that characterise the urban visual landscape. They are, on the contrary, just the latest arrival in a long visual tradition that has constantly associated the city with the practice of representing key faces in its public space (Macho 1999; Macho and Treusch-Dieter 1996). Several aspects of the relation between cities and facial representation have been investigated, yet an all-encompassing, trans-historical and trans-cultural look at the matter is still wanting. Faces of famous or prominent people, of key protagonists of the history of the city, have always been represented through various media and arts on the surface of the public space. The construction of public memory as well as its erasure and reconstruction along opposite lines has constantly adopted the face – with its different dimensions, aspects and connections with the head, the body and the visual context – for the promotion of a certain ideology. Representations

of faces, moreover, have been used to evoke abstract values and ideals, even in the paradox of the anonymous face represented in order to symbolically refer to a whole category of faces (the unknown soldier, for instance). With the advent of pop culture, however, cities have increasingly been decorated and resignified not only by institutional representations of faces (from those of propaganda to those of public monuments), but also through the fleeting but constant depiction of faces in advertising, whose marketing agency now covers cities with commercial representations of faces. Also, and in parallel, a new kind of street and urban art has emerged, which often adopts gigantic representations of faces as a means to subvert the traditional monumentalism of the past and extol the virtues of 'common people' in urban history.

Although each of these forms of facial representation is the object of abundant bibliography, what is still missing is a systematic study of how images of faces are used to connotate the semantics of the city, with specific attention to the nuanced dialectics between old and new media, analogic and digital representations, institutional and grassroot effigies, artistic depictions and commercial images. Images of faces of various kinds constantly characterise the visual landscape of the city, yet many of them are so familiar that they passed unnoticed, even by scholars. This area is now complexified by the development of screen technology, which allows more and more moving images of faces, sometimes even with three-dimensional and holographic effects, to appear in the visual fabric of the city. This is related also to a further neglected issue: cities are populated not only by faces (biological, virtual, represented, hybrid), but also by quasi-faces; it is by a cultural convention, indeed, that faces of citizens are neatly distinguished, also linguistically, from the muzzles of their pets (Leone 2020e). Both (non-human) animal quasi-faces and the quasi-faces of technological devices now more and more appear in cities; their presence is destined to increase and to lead to the question of the 'uncanny city', that is, the systematic presence, in the urban environment, of face simulacra that are extremely photo-realistic and meant to be ergonomically friendly, yet often end up stirring as a response in humans a disquieting feeling of uncanniness.

6   FACES OF THE CITY

Human faces in the city, virtual faces around the city, represented faces on the city, quasi-faces across the city: a last aspect of the relation between urban spaces and urban faces is to be evoked here. The city itself, according to several understandings, is a sort of living organism and, as a consequence, it is also endowed with a kind of face. This metaphoric acceptance of 'the face of the city' has both historical roots and contemporary implications. As is evident from the historiography of cities and their urban and architectural space, the human idea of a city has often been related to the notion of its 'soul', some-

thing that cannot be eradicated even if the city is destroyed by enemy attack or through calamity. The Romans would so firmly believe in this persistence that, after destroying Cartago to its foundations, they nevertheless prayed for the local gods to move elsewhere and they ex-augurated the area by plowing it backwards, so that Cartago might never again resurrect from its ashes (Leone 2009). At the same time, in many civilisations, including that of ancient China, the urban landscape has a face that is not only metaphorical but finds its representations in urban landscape images looking like faces, or in those through which artists seek to grasp the spirit of the urban face. In China, the genre of the landscape painting evolved prior to the introduction of the portrait through contacts with Western art, so that traditional painters actually started representing human faces as though they were the countenance of landscapes and cities (Leone 2019).

7   CONCLUSIONS: FACES AND FAÇADES

All these aspects of the relation between urban spaces and urban faces must be systematically considered in describing the facescapes developed by human cultures. The meaning of cities, indeed, is generated by complex interactions among elements and entities endowed with various degrees of spatio-temporal stability and agency. The architecture of façades is more durable than the physiognomy of faces, yet they are both subtly connected in complex interactions: on the one hand, façades are shaped by mimicking some of the forms and functions of faces, providing an architectural membrane through which households and other human groups interact with the external environment; on the other hand, human faces are more and more scrutinised by new machinic devices and agents of vision, observation, recognition and identification that mushroom on the surfaces of cities. Citizens look at the façades of their urban dwellings, but they are also more and more looked back at, in a relation between human gaze and automatic gaze that is showing a tendency to develop both symmetry and asymmetry. Machine gazes endowed with artificial intelligence increasingly function like human gazes, yet the social, political, economic, legal and technical assemblages that they represent are dangerously characterised by a panopticon potential, which might generate unbalances in the relation between the eyes of the citizens and the eyes of the city, the façades of buildings and the faces in the street. In Levinas' famous reflection on the ethics of facial intersubjectivity, faces are opposed to façades so as to stress that the former carry on an ethical inviolability that the latter do not exude. The increasing digitalisation of faces, as well as the increasing digitalisation of façades, might however shorten the semiotic and ethical distance between them, leading to a progressive reification of the human face but also to an increasing agency of façades. Semiotics can give an important contribution

to the study of these rapidly evolving facescapes, also in order to defend the humanity of digital faces against the inhumanity of digital façades.

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NOTES

1.   '¿Cómo puedo no conocer hoy tu rostro mañana, el que ya está o se fragua bajo la cara que enseñas o bajo la careta que llevas, y que me mostrarás tan sólo cuando no lo espere?' (Marías 2002, p. 159).
2.   www.facets-erc.eu/.
3.   Especially Dorotinsky (2018).

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