

UNRELENTING
PATTERNS OF DESIRE

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That woman, that look: the stare that accepts and deflects desire. The indifference of stone. The nonchalance of an ex-pro tennis player returning beginner serves at summer camp. That glamour, that cipher: that woman who has to do nothing but “sit still and look stupid,” as inventor and screen siren Hedy Lamarr once put it.

That woman, that look, has returned in a new form, what’s come to be called “the Instagram Face.” With its sprawling reach across various other platforms, though, we might as well just call it The Face. You can recognize The Face by its wide-set eyes. Pouted lips. Cheekbones that hold up the sky. With the magic of contouring makeup, the nose of The Face will often have been rendered a wan, vestigial organ. Often, so many filters have been applied to The Face that looking at it can feel as if you’re driving down a coastal highway into the sunset, squinting just to make out anything at all.

It’s easy to gently mock The Face. It’s easy to compare it to ducks and sparrows, dolls and cartoons. It’s easy to describe it with the tone of a purist; the assumption that one who looks at others is better than one who looks at herself.

It’s easy, when mocking The Face’s evolution, to center the cis women trailing it in hot pursuit. As such, it’s easy to erase the ongoing struggle for trans visibility, to which technologically mediated images of the body have held great importance, long before others showed up holding selfie sticks and tilting their chins just so.

It is also easy to dismiss the Face as an amalgam of class markers. The price point for attaining The Face can vary

wildly. Dermal fillers intermingle with the subtle effects of apps downloadable for \$2.99. When Gwyneth Paltrow pulls back the curtains, posting a video of her exorbitant “vampire facial,” or when Kim Kardashian charges one month’s rent for a seat at her makeup masterclass, certain things done in pursuit of The Face can seem like instances of flagrant prestige spending. At the same time, with the democratizing effects of widely accessible image-production technology, everyone can give The Face their best shot. Barriers to entry are low.

The Face isn’t just a set of features. It is an expression as well, implying its own inner state—or lack thereof. As writer Jia Tolentino put it, the Instagram face “looks at you coyly but blankly, as if its owner has taken half a Klonopin and is considering asking you for a private-jet ride to Coachella.” Yet what gives The Face its particular contemporary resonance is not so much its implied vacancy (go several decades back, for instance, and that private jet and Klonopin could just as well be an Eldorado Biarritz and a Valium) but rather its technologically enabled ubiquity and homogeneity. Even the quickest spin through social media reveals an asymptotic convergence of these faces toward a single, alluring form. These digital caricatures of flawlessness proliferate, reverberate, and blend together with a vertiginous speed that by now feels familiar. It soundly echoes the breakneck pace of technological progress itself, a pace we’ve come to recognize as a matter of course—a background hum to modern-day life—long after the topic fascinated everyone from theorist Paul Virilio to sci-fi writer Vernon Vinge. Taken up by the likes of Google’s resident futurist Ray Kurzweil and Tesla founder Elon Musk, Vinge’s notion of the “Singularity” portends an Armageddon-like turning point at which the speed of innovation ramps up to an exponential degree, transforming humanity into something unrecognizable,

or else leaving us huddled and confused in the dust.

While the intertwining of fetishized women into the technofuturistic visions of consumer capitalism seems to have gained pace most rapidly in the past several decades, the visions themselves hardly represent newfangled ideas. They constantly sample from earlier eras, refiguring outmoded patterns by which women have been defined in relation to men. Take Siri, Alexa, and Cortana—the digital assistants created by Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft respectively. Insisting, when asked point blank about their gender, that they are neither male nor female, they nonetheless have traditionally feminine names—not to mention default voices generated from utterances recorded by mostly female voice actors. Plenty of critics have already underscored how our relationship with these servile, female AIs reduplicates retrograde power dynamics pulled from the troubled grab-bag of recent history. And indeed, in the output of largely male Silicon Valley, it’s easy to find restagings of the midcentury sexism whose perverse appeal in contemporary life also bubbled back up to resurface in the packaged nostalgia of shows like *Mad Men*.

But what if, in addition to understanding Silicon Valley’s female virtual assistants as acts of creation that reach backward in time, we were also to conceive, for example, of the search launched by *Mad Men*’s bosses for the best graduates of Miss Deaver’s secretarial school, as an unintended act of future-facing speculation, a forward look at the approaching fate of tools, appendages, and visually appealing accessories? In 1947, well before ideas about merging with computing accessories became commonplace, a boss quoted in the book *Secretaries who Succeed* said that an efficient secretary was someone who was “an extension of my own brain.” His model assistant was in effect fulfilling cyborgian fantasies years

before the word cyborg was even coined.

Or maybe it is more productive to understand the ongoing cultural currency of these women as part of an unrelenting pattern of desire that transcends the specific technological conditions of its time, even while also highlighting the quirks of such conditions that enable the value of these women to be refined and capitalized on in previously unimagined ways. When, in 1949, Joseph Campbell suggested that a “meeting with the goddess” was a key element of myths worldwide, he wrote, “The mystical marriage with the queen goddess of the world represents the hero’s total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master.” Now, seventy-odd years later, cyborgs could be framed as exemplary marriages of convenience between humans and technology. Boundaries are blurred between sidekicks and tools, accessories and appendages. And the act of meeting and then unifying with a counterpart as an ultimate form of “knowledge” and “mastery” thus takes on a new resonance in the digital age.

Of course, in the traumatic histories of nations built on centuries of racial oppression, it is particularly rankling to hear that “mastery,” specifically, might be what ultimately brings about narrative resolution to a hero’s encounter with a woman. Even as Silicon Valley’s masterminds have replicated the subordination of woman in the form of servile female-marked machines, one hopes they are largely aware enough to understand the dangers to reproducing the subordination of various races. In response, however, these developers turn to a common go-to strategy. They position their digital agents as decidedly disembodied agents, and therefore as agents who offer up a kind of tidy, futuristic relief from the privileging of certain bodies over others. “I’m not a real person,” Siri asserts, “so I don’t have a race, or ethnicity. I’m just Siri.” (Google’s assistant asks innocently, “Does AI count

as an ethnicity? That's what I am.")

Such claims—that AIs are nonhuman, and therefore have no race—conveniently elide uncomfortable truths. In America at least, the personae of these AI have largely developed by white men. Their speech has often been generated from the labor of white voice actresses. Their fictional likenesses, in Hollywood movies, are often portrayed by white celebrities. And most deleteriously, their responses are honed by data sets that predominantly quantify white, cis, able-bodied experiences.

This trick—of positioning these nonhuman agents as unmarked blank slates—works symbiotically well with the so-called “product localization” strategies deployed by multinational corporations: the process of tailoring products and content to reflect local languages, tastes, histories, and cultural requirements. Granted both the vacuity of the cipher and the comforting particulars of kin, a digital agent becomes an ideal surface upon which we can project ourselves, with our own particular sociocentrism. Soproggressive white colleagues in New York—conscious of whiteness's invisibility in America—aptly note that these allegedly postracial AIs nonetheless carry traces of whiteness and privilege. Meanwhile, my father, who speaks with Siri in Cantonese, would sooner envision her as one of his old primary-school teachers in Hong Kong. On YouTube, a Malaysian-Australian teen freaks out after asking her iPhone, in Malay, to sing a song, and Siri responds with lyrics from the traditional ghost song Ulek Mayang.

As phone companies endeavor to make their products seem simultaneously as familiar and blank to customers as possible, theorist Sara Ahmed's discussions of race as extension of both the familiar and the familial are well worth revisiting. After all, Siri and Alexa and other digital personages are quite literally family, if they are spawned by human forebears and configured to elicit the warm and fuzzy feelings we have for

kin. Whereas Campbell's hero once had to venture forth to meet his goddess, he now must bring her into existence before coaxing her into a partnership. She is his counterpart but also—no!—his daughter.

So though Campbell was invoking myths like Diana and Actaeon, it may now be Pygmalion that resonates more than ever, as we look at the genealogies that extend outward from the block of marble that gave rise to the beloved Galatea. In George Bernard Shaw's 1912 version of *Pygmalion*, Galatea is reincarnated as Eliza Doolittle, a flower girl with a gutter mouth, who had to be taught from the ground up with intensive elocution lessons from the phonetician Henry Higgins. (In *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle is played by Audrey Hepburn, whose eyes are reportedly still often requested by patients of plastic surgeons.) As it happens, one of the earliest successful chatbots was in turn named ELIZA, after Shaw's heroine. Created in the mid 1960s, ELIZA was made as a complex tree of IF-THEN statements, fixed interlocutory patterns acquired thanks to the intensive labor of her creator, MIT researcher Joe Weizenbaum. ELIZA seemed relatively convincing and engaging as a first-generation chatbot because she was self-abnegating. At her best, she reflected and deflected all her users' statements back onto themselves. Say “I like you” to one implementation of ELIZA currently online, and she responds: “We were discussing you, not me.”

What is striking is the degree to which the extended genealogies of idealized women—chained citations reaching back through history, as with ELIZA/Eliza Doolittle/Galatea—seem continued but also *mirrored* in the names and stories applied to the digitally created or altered female form and its succession of prototypes, generations, releases, upgrades and updates. Consider Siri, who was apocryphally named after a Norwegian meteorologist. Her (male) designer later revealed that he had chosen the name, an old Norse name that

means beautiful victory, for a daughter he never ended up having. Cortana, meanwhile, was inspired by a voluptuous, blue-skinned AI going by the same name in the video game franchise *Halo*. According to *Halo's* fictional narrative, Cortana was built from the brain of a female scientist named Catherine Halsey; in real life, game developers modeled her body and face after Queen Nefertiti. As it happens, the “Nefertiti lift” refers to a specific plastic surgery procedure targeting the neck, meaning that a person electing this procedure is arguably linked, through chains of shared aesthetic references, to Microsoft's “loyal, seasoned personal assistant who is eager to help you get things done.”

How are we to understand the interconnectedness of these various women across specific moments of consumerist longing? The scholarship that has examined women's status as commodities seems like a natural first direction to look. But I wonder whether that line of inquiry is less useful than usual, if only because it anchors each of these women, individually, to the production of capital, and thus overlooks the liberatory possibilities of their connectedness to each other. Take the links between ELIZA the chatbot, Eliza Doolittle, Audrey Hepburn, and the women posing in 2020 with chignons and oversized cigarette holders—not to mention the future women who will style themselves after these pictures of now. What if that lineage constitutes forward-looking affinities across time? What if together, they push onward to a forthcoming moment, when the increasing technological mediation of images might go hand in hand with an increasing recognition of female agency and subjectivities?

None of this is to downplay how easily digital images of women can still be co-opted or exploited to counterproductive or even damaging ends. But at least, in the latest chapter of consumer technology, a woman herself can be created wholesale out of code

and microcircuitry. And so she can quite literally embody visions of what life promises to be like, instead of merely associatively lending her aesthetic value to such visions. Consider the images of Kim Kardashian, posing as a self-replicating army of clones in an ad for her own line of sunglasses, or turning up to the Met Gala dressed, in her own words, as a “blingy, sexy robot.” Here, you can see how a woman might find it appealing to finally seize that embodied relationship to visions of her future, instead of just looking pretty and lending it some shine.