

Facial (Re) Cognition: Windows and Mirrors, and Screens

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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of facial recognition software in everyday life has prompted both criticism and examination of the ethical use of facial recognition as it pertains to issues of surveillance, privacy and discrimination. The use of facial recognition as a tool of social-sorting with the potential to result in discrimination, inequality, and invasion of privacy rights, is an urgent issue that numerous researchers currently address. Much of the research has focused on the lack of diversified data sets that are used to design algorithms used in facial recognition software and how the results are used in ways that discriminate and are an invasion of privacy. [1][2][3][4][5][6] While these critical claims justify further research and action, there has been little consideration of the agent(s) of recognition in facial recognition systems and how the issue of agency affects human perception of the results. Hayles argues that technical information-processing systems (such as facial recognition) function as cognizers, because they have the ability to make decisions. [7] It is important that debates about the use of facial recognition systems acknowledge algorithmic agency and its potential to enhance human perception.

Developing this argument, I contextualize facial recognition as a current device in the evolution of photographic portraiture, and how it addresses the politics of the face through identification, classification and social-sorting as an assertion of power.[8] According to Szarkowski, photographs can be read and understood as either perspectives on the world or as extensions of their maker's self-conception. [9] The addition of algorithmic agency in facial recognition systems adds a layer of complexity to the traditional photographer–

subject–viewer relationship that is referred to by Szarkowski. By acknowledging the cognitive agency of algorithmic intelligence, we must consider who or what is doing the recognition? Who or what is generating the portrait? Do the outputs determined by facial recognition function as a window and/or mirror, and in either case who or what is being revealed or reflected – a human perspective, an artificial intelligence perspective, or an assemblage of both?

I shall examine these questions through the philosophical lens of Deleuze and Guattari, who assert that “the face is a politics,” and through their theory of becoming, which argues for the idea of seeing with greater openness and the expansion of perception beyond the human being as the origin of perception. [11] I argue that algorithmic re-cognition is generative, not representational. Therefore, we must consider the portrait generated through facial recognition as an algorithmic re-cognition of the subject, portrayed in a constant state of becoming. I propose that the challenge presented to humans is to perceive the state of becoming offered by algorithmic production and allow it the potential to enhance human perception.

References

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Biography

Megan Olinger is a PhD candidate at City University of Hong Kong in the School of Creative Media. Her research focuses on artificial intelligence and human perspective.