Coda
Instagram Face

"When Did We Become So Obsessed with Being 'Symmetrical'?" is the headline for an article by Rhonda Garelick in a 2022 column of the *New York Times*, tellingly published in a section titled "Face Forward."[1] The question is prompted by the proliferation and popularity of apps that reveal and/or fix asymmetries of the face. In recent years, a number of digital technologies have transformed the face into an object of renewed self-fascination and public display. The apps momentarily give the impression of virtual plastic surgery, smoothing out perceived irregularities. In a circular logic, they give the illusion that one would present one's face in a better light when filmed or photographed on *other* digital platforms. An affective combination of surprise and horror is the result for most users. In response to the question about our obsession with symmetry, Garelick points to the fact that Leonardo da Vinci was obsessed with symmetry; so was Albert Einstein; and so is today's neuroscience. This book has offered a narrower answer to Garelick's question: Modernism, often thought to be a site of formal challenge, effacement, and disfiguration, has been consequential in reinforcing our investment in the face as form.

I wrote most of the pages of this book during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, with the exception of family members and a few friends, I encountered all faces, visual or literary, on a screen. I read old physiognomy books in digitized format. I looked up paintings and photographs on a computer. My students appeared as faces on a screen. For a while, my private life unfolded largely on screens as well: I did not see my mother's face "in person" for two years. All of us, those who welcome Facebook, FaceTime, and variations thereof into our lives, as well as those who resist them, lived in what Marion Zilio calls "Faceworld."[2] Far from being an abstract term, *interface* – the space between two faces, in this case one belonging to a human being and the other to a computer – names the condition of possibility for writing this book. Working on the project

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009599801.008 Published online by Cambridge University Press

helped me understand that, as Ksenia Fedorova shows, computer operations have been anthropomorphized and, centrally, facialized.[3] The research for this book confirmed that such facialization occurs as a function of a modern faciality machine, which expands the semiotic qualities of the face across human and nonhuman landscapes.

I framed the project of this book in the Introduction a history of the present. Among the contemporary cultural phenomena that prompt a renewed inquiry into the history of the face – the face as the site for the technologization of subjectivity, the face as a node of biometric surveillance, the face as a battleground for the politics of race, and the face as a screen for the contradictions of the COVID-19 pandemic – developments in digital technologies stand out. On an arc between the end of the nineteenth century to today, the face-to-face has become the space of interface, a technical interface in broad terms, but an increasingly digital interface. The ensuing object of fascination has been condensed in the phrase "Instagram Face."[4] Taking its name from a social media platform that started as a space for photography sharing, Instagram Face, Jia Tolentino argues, has come to name the crossroads where digital technologies meet new developments in cosmetic surgery and the cosmetic industry.[5] The latter reinforce each other, such that cosmeticians promise temporary solutions to "problems" addressed by cosmetic surgeons, while the latter take cues from the best beauticians.[6] All use apps like FaceTune to sketch the face they subsequently create. The "filtered face" is the new normal in the age of the selfie.[7] A young or younger-looking face remains the desired horizon.[8] Not surprisingly, Instagram Face is imbricated with the visual politics of race: The paradigmatic Instagram Face is a Kardashian. "The face," writes Tolentino, "is distinctly white but ambiguously ethnic." Described as "an unrealistic sculpture" and "a *face* that looks like it's made out of clay," this face is the digital-world-meets-late-capitalism descendant of the racially ambiguous modernist face this book has described.

Alongside the preoccupation with symmetry at work in Instagram Face and its offshoots, facial-recognition technologies return us to the face as form – and often to the history of physiognomy. Eloquently, one of the first facial-recognition projects identified itself as "computer physiognomy."[9] Kashmir Hill has documented the fact that the founders of Clearview AI (a search engine for faces) explicitly linked their technology to an attempt to resurrect physiognomy.[10] One can no longer underestimate the pervasiveness and impact of these technologies. "Face hunters" have scraped the internet of billions of images of faces. They are used to read the gender of the unborn, such that the old performative

statement "It's a girl!" – the performative sentence theorized by Judith Butler as initiating the subject's interpellation into gender – now initiates interpellation into a technologized subjectivity *before* birth.[11] They increasingly claim to read affective states.[12] They create a predicament in which social capital is short-circuited through the face.[13] The same algorithms are used in some dating apps, creating differential desirability across race and ethnicity.[14] It is paramount that we fold the history of physiognomy back into this ongoing critical conversation, heeding Kelly Gates's warning: "The use of the face as an object for the social and biological classification of people has a long and sordid history, indelibly tied to the use of the human sciences to justify social inequality."[15]

In turn, what Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism" has acquired new dimensions.[16] Clearview AI offers their services to autocrats, advertising the technology's potential to identify political enemies.[17] It makes it available for military purposes, such that it was used to identify dead soldiers.[18] Facial recognition technologies have been used to grant access to public spaces, functioning essentially as an ID, thus literalizing the mapping of face onto belonging in space.[19] They have become instrumental as a biometric tool, filtering international mobility and citizenship rights. Recently, facial recognition has been used to process housing applications.[20] The company Faception describes itself as a provider of "facial personality analytics"; their goal: "We reveal personality from facial images at scale to revolutionize how companies, organizations and even robots understand people." Another company, HireVue, designed a technology that uses AI to interview job candidates, enlisting biometric facial information in the assessment of professional skills.[21] A recent study sparked outrage when it used facial recognition to determine sexual orientation.[22] The cumulative effect of these technologies has been the "automatization of visual labor."[23] In a Lavaterian dystopia, the ultimate manifestation of these developments is a pair of augmented reality glasses that automatically identify the person in front of us.[24] The work I have done for this book reminds us that the desire to automatize facial perception – whether at the level of the body, as has been the case in the past, or with the help of technology – is a physiognomic desire. As Kashmir puts it, "the journey to unlock the secrets of the human face" is "an ambition with very deep roots."[25] Of physiognomic provenance is likewise the assumption that the form of the face, a geometric minimalist arrangement of features, carries identifying information about personhood. While it might be tempting to contemplate a posthuman world that is concomitantly *postface*, the face has returned as a hinge linking a network of disparate digital databases.[26]

Reactions to the reappearance of physiognomy in the digital world have been swift. A growing scholarly literature attests to the bias embedded in facial recognition algorithms. Scholars have uncovered evidence of racial bias in facial-recognition algorithms.[27] Training sets continue to rely on and include police archives, including mug shots.[28] Blaise Aguera y Arcas, Margaret Mitchell, and Alexander Todorov refer to some developments in facial recognition under the explicit rubric of "physiognomy's new clothes."[29] Across this literature, there is a growing awareness that technology is biased because training sets are biased.[30] As Cathy O'Neil writes, "data embeds the dark past."[31] This book has traced a segment of this past: The data embeds the long history of the face, including elements of a physiognomic tradition revised in the modernist period.[32]

In turn, activists, artists, and scholars have proposed strategies (face painting, reflecting glasses, hats, masks, etc.) for evading face reading.[33] The mask, in particular, returns in this context as a social and aesthetic mode of "auto-facial-construction" for the digital age. Importantly, such strategies include hacking various digital technologies, as in the use of "the digital veil" (or face swap) to hide the faces of vulnerable activists.[34] Tyne Sumner has traced a mode of contemporary poetics that deploys "drone poetics" critically.[35] A wave of recent affect theory has theorized strategies of fugitivity that take the specific form of facial inscrutability and inexpression. Centrally, Tina Post has recuperated the creative use of deadpan in African American arts as a mode of critical inscrutability.[36] Responses to facial recognition often draw on literary sources, often in science fiction (an echo of Kōbō Abe's turn to the genre), reinforcing this book's premise that a study of literature in relation to physiognomy helps trace a prehistory of facial recognition and offers inspiration for acts of revision.[37]

At the same time, research on the decoding of faces has itself been described as having taken "a physiognomic turn," as scholars return to the study of physiognomy as a discourse that can help explain the politics of the face in the contemporary world.[38] While facial-recognition technologies are new as biometric tools, this book has argued that they are embedded in a long history of face perception, itself part of a broad historical and cultural matrix. Often following in Walter Benjamin's footsteps, scholars of modernist studies have long framed the shifts in perception produced by urban mass culture (new means of transportation, new technologies), which modernist literature registers. Foregrounding modernist authors' engagement with their "now," Pamela L. Caughie invokes how "writers drove motor cars and rode omnibuses, watched skyscrapers erected, and shopped in department stores, listened to the gramophone and radio, and attended

the cinema and jazz clubs. New visual, aural, and corporeal experiences created new sensory perceptions, new forms of imagination, and new states of consciousness conveyed in the novelistic styles that we have come to call modernist."[39] Caughie reminds us of Fredric Jameson's pronouncement that "our perceptual habits were formed in that older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism."[40] This book has isolated both the continuity with the nineteenth century and a modernist shift in the perception of faces – with an eye to rendering this mode of perception visible in our own contemporaneity.

Gates notes that new technologies of face reading often "married the archaic with the futuristic."[41] Physiognomy represents an "archaic" force that persists beyond its heyday and in one of the most unlikely places: literary modernism. We have seen it at work in Virginia Woolf's ironic description of Orlando's meeting with the queen. We have witnessed it resurface in the construction of Thomas Mann's racialized minor characters. Marcel Proust's concomitant reproduction and challenge to physiognomy, as dramatized through the character of Odette, offered a revised version of physiognomy. Gertrude Stein went a step further, to design a method of evading physiognomy by evading the face altogether. We have traced Nella Larsen's response to aspects of Stein's project in her framing of the face of whiteness at work in the act of passing. Finally, we have seen physiognomic ideas hybridized in Kōbō Abe's work, which stages ethical questions pertaining to physiognomy's travels and instrumentalization by globalized cosmetic surgery.

Modernism, long imagined as a break with literary tradition, emerges from this book as concomitantly a site of continuity with the nineteenth century. If the novel, as Woolf's conceit had it, is a "remarkable machine for the production of character," Woolf's work staged a debate about the nature of modernist character.[42] Woolf's "Mrs Brown" is an altogether different literary form from her precursors in the nineteenth-century novel. But the face remains a constitutive element in the construction of modernist characters. To return to the negative portrait of "Mrs John Stuart Mill," as Woolf sees her: "She had no face. . . . Without eyes or hair, cheeks or lips, her stupendous genius, her consummate virtue, availed her nothing."[43] Woolf and the other modernist writers in the archive of this book gave face to a gallery of characters that otherwise might have remained faceless. They did so with a lot of ambivalence, skeptical of the physiognomy of the nineteenth century. And yet, one of Woolf's projects, "An Unwritten Novel," posits a method for sketching a modernist character that starts from the observation of a face.[44] The observation occurs on a

train, a scene of reading, as the narrator shifts attention between reading the newspaper and reading the faces of other passengers in the train, pausing over the countenance of a weary, unhappy, sighing older woman. This observation conjures an entire world: the woman's habits and tics, the history of her love life, her household, even her God. The narrator speculates about the woman's potential criminality. Woolf's short fragment nonetheless reveals a deep skepticism that the enduring fascination with faces can move beyond surface reading. "Have I read you right?" the narrator wonders. Eventually, the woman's face retains what the text frames as its secret. The conclusion is echoed, across a transatlantic comparative arc, by Nella Larsen's character Irene, as she is "puzzling" over Clare's face, which nonetheless remains "unfathomable."[45] This book has traced the modernist history of the temptation to think otherwise.