

CHAPTER 8



Twin Faces as Sites of Uncertainty in Algorithmic Image Cultures

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In November 2017, a number of identical twin social media stars with vast online followings posted videos on their YouTube accounts to mark the release of the iPhone X. There was one feature of the new range of phones that the twins were especially excited to test for their millions of followers: Face ID. The new biometric scanner built into the front camera system was being presented by Apple as the future of smart phone security, set to replace Touch ID on all subsequent models. The identification system's TrueDepth camera works by projecting 30,000 infrared dots onto the operator's face, which are used to trace its contours and produce a map. This map is then converted into a 2D image which becomes that iPhone's master key, without which it cannot be unlocked. This new security system seemed to be a gift to twin consumer tech reviewers determined to identify flaws in the interface: what better test for face-recognition algorithms than identical twin faces? Most videos showed the twins were able to unlock each other's phones. As one of the Dolan Twins told their more than nine million subscribers, 'according to Apple, Ethan and I are the same person'.¹ The appeal of twin YouTube stars echoes what Lisa Zunshine calls 'cognitively enjoyable' exercises of the twin plots employed in early modern drama.² The mistaken identity trope produced through the twin characters in Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, for instance, challenges the audience's essentialist biases by momentarily troubling the borders between individual identities and threatening to sever the bond, fundamental to capitalist modernity, between individual bodies and individual identities. In the Face ID videos, however, it is not just the cultural assumptions of viewers that are put to the test, but also those of the biotechnical systems of control that are becoming increasingly naturalised through their incorporation into everyday communication technologies.

Kelly Gates argues that the roots of our current faith in facial recognition technology, evidenced by the techno-utopian iPhone X marketing discourse, can be found in the uncertainty of the aftermath of 9/11. Following the attacks, CCTV footage that emerged of two alleged hijackers passing through airport security prompted a claim that an automated rather than human-controlled face-recognition

system would have connected the images of the two men to their profiles in the CIA database and potentially prevented the catastrophe. The glitch in the system was not the technology but the human operator. This, Gates claims, is the origin story that has served to legitimise all subsequent facial recognition initiatives, instilling faith in greater automation and increasingly complex integration between bodies and information networks. As Lila Lee-Morrison puts it, biometric systems ‘as risk mitigation and security technologies, have specific desired outcomes, namely, to establish identity as clearly as possible in a geopolitical landscape of uncertainty and in the context of border control’.³

But Face ID is only the latest biometric technology promising to ‘stabilize the messy ambiguity of identity, to automatically read a stable, individual identity off the body’.⁴ Biometric systems emerged in parallel with twin studies methodologies during the second half of the nineteenth century, in response to the rapid growth of an urban population deemed a potential threat to security. Systems such as Alphonse Bertillon’s anthropometrics, which combined photographic images with databases of information about body types to aid the identification of criminals, promised to render each individual of the growing urban mass identifiable and therefore the object of state control. The advantage of face-recognition systems over other biometric technologies, such as fingerprint or iris recognition, is that they function at a distance and can therefore work without the consent of whoever is being scanned. Facial recognition technologies currently constitute the primary means of shoring up the connections between bodies and identities in a context in which the latter are increasingly produced by networked digital information.

Twin studies have always been closely entangled with biometric technologies, at the levels of both ideology and methodology. As William Viney points out, the twins used in Francis Galton’s experiments of the 1880s ‘formed part of a wider perceptual apparatus; they gave a new way of seeing’.⁵ Galton’s interest in twins as evidence of the influence of inheritance on human nature is closely connected to his experiments with photographic technology. Galton became interested in the potential of photography to visualise human types, such as in the composite photographs that he produced during the same decade as the twin studies. While the twin studies technique was thought to reveal the agency of inherited factors on human development over generations, beyond the immediate evidence of environment and upbringing, composite photographs were developed as a technique for rendering visible the human types that inform and structure individual differences. As Allan Sekula put it in his influential study of Galton’s photographic portraiture, while ‘Bertillon sought to embed the photograph in the archive [...] Galton sought to embed the archive in the photography’.⁶ Twin bodies and photographic technologies, therefore, both held the promise of revealing hidden secrets about individual identity.

However, the twin bond has also been used to question the effectiveness of these technologies and test their limits. A 2018 National Institute of Standards of Technology report on the efficacy of commercial face-recognition algorithms identifies twin faces as an enduring stumbling block. ‘One component of the

residual errors is that which arises from incorrect association of twins'; of the 127 algorithms tested, only one 'can correctly distinguish twins'.⁷ However, as Kevin Bowyer and Patrick Flynn point out, in these tests the faces of monozygotic twins serve as adversarial images: training tools used to improve the capabilities of the technology. Furthermore, just as the 'exotic' appeal of twins was exploited as a marketing tool by the genetic studies experiments of the 1990s (such as the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart), security software developers use twin tests as a publicity strategy.⁸

Despite the fact that simply by using these applications the twin influencers are presenting them as desirable, by pointing to and embodying a failure in the ever more pervasive biometric systems, the twin Face ID videos open up a space for their critique. In his work on computer worms and viruses, Jussi Parikka argues that digital technologies that have been naturalised to the point of 'ontological invisibility' only reveal themselves in the event of breaking down.⁹ Every media ecology, he argues, 'seems to have an accident of its own'.¹⁰ Accidents 'reveal technology, and the power/knowledge relations that media are embedded in'.¹¹ Often described as genetic 'accidents', twins introduce mistakes or glitches into the dominant regimes of power regulating digital cultures. Twin faces function as blockages in the increasingly smooth biometric interfaces that are binding humans with computational systems in more and more elaborate ways. In the process, despite their apparent frivolity, twin Face ID videos invite us to think the human-computer interface differently.

In this article, I explore the citation of algorithmic image systems in the performance of twinship in digital cultures and examine how twins introduce blockages into biometric technologies, in particular facial recognition software. I explore how these blockages constitute moments of uncertainty in the datafication of identity through a study of the performance of identical twinship as a form of mask or act of strategic invisibility, which takes place through the citation of biometric surveillance technologies on social media. The uncertainty of these events is echoed by other uses of the trope of twinship as a method for navigating algorithmic image cultures, including the location of 'twin strangers' on online image databases and the practice of the 'twin selfie'. These deployments of twins and twinship clash with the dominant social media logic of homophily which consolidates social divisions through a production of sameness and stasis. Unlike homophily, twinning here is driven by a logic of dynamic disequilibrium that is characterised by constant change, mutual modulation, and fractal involution. Whereas in the twin studies of the nineteenth century and the eugenics movements that they influenced, twin bodies were used to construct and render legible archives of human types, in digital cultures twinning functions more often as a counter-archive that introduces disorder into the policing of sameness by the logic of homophily.

Misrecognitions of Facial Recognition Technology

The videos in which twin influencers explore the limitations of commercial facial recognition technologies expose the contradictions that are characteristic of social media celebrity. They simultaneously present themselves as autonomous individuals, resourcefully carving out their own brand, and relays in information networks, mere conduits between commercial products and potential consumers. The hesitation between these two modes encodes wider tensions within digital image cultures, between a celebration and displacement of images and between conflicting regimes of power. Influencer duos such as the Dolan Twins and Brooklyn and Bailey present themselves as the exemplary network labourers of the digital economy: forging connections between disparate t(w)eens behind their screens, brokering alliances between products and consumers, communicating effortlessly across the various platforms of digital life while evidencing fluency in the always-emerging hybrid languages that each platform demands. In many ways, the Face ID video released on YouTube by the Dolan brothers Ethan and Grayson on 4 November 2017, which at the time of writing has been viewed nearly fifteen million times, takes to an extreme the medial self-reflexivity of all their output. It does so by drawing attention to the act of communication and connection itself over and above the actual content of the communication. By citing biometric surveillance technologies, the Face ID videos focus on the act of interfacing with computer systems, something that the twins do so efficiently that they can easily access both their own and their sibling's information without encumbrance. The split screen technique used to show the mobile phone as they set up and use Face ID is a visual enactment of the ease with which they slip and flow between different informational networks (Figure 8.1).



FIG. 8.1. Grayson Dolan setting up Face ID on the iPhone X, from Grayson and Ethan Dolan, 'Twins vs. iPhone X Face ID' <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfT0aupYxq4>> [accessed 7 December 2023].

In this, the twin stars are the embodiment of ‘nodal citizenship’, a term Grant Bollmer has coined to describe those who efficiently carry out the current economic and social imperative to ‘relate to others by connecting and maintaining flows’ of data.¹² Increasing connectivity in this regime is presented as an innate need of human nature. In the process, the agentic role of technology — the ways in which technologies embody and reinforce ideological discourses — are elided: ‘The ability to distinguish between human and technology is eroded, producing humans as objects that serve as imagined material relays supposedly interchangeable with infrastructure’.¹³ Social media are central to this conflation of humans and technology, producing users as ‘posthuman’ through a ‘deeply ingrained and ultimately quotidian belief that it is in human nature to connect and circulate flows of information and capital’.¹⁴ Within this regime, twin YouTubers present themselves as the ideal of posthuman connectivity. The ubiquitous technologies of digital communication in their videos merely reinforce the ‘natural’ connectedness that exists between them as twins. Rather than an aberration, the twin influencers present themselves as taking to an extreme an innate human predisposition towards interconnectedness. However, alongside this enactment of digitisation, in the videos the twins also enact their detachment from technology. Through their critique, they mark themselves as separate from and suspicious of the introduction of new systems of mediation. The premise and tone of the videos parody the claims to scientific objectivity made on behalf of the new Apple iPhone software. The twins carry out a series of experiments that test the limitations of the software in a way that echoes the studies surveyed by Bowyer and Flynn. Grayson and Ethan both in turn hold the phone at arm’s length with a neutral facial expression, presenting themselves in false solemnity as species for the inspection of machine vision.

These tensions are reproduced in the physical act of interfacing or attempting to interface both with their electronic devices and with each other. While the mock objectivity of the influencers performs the scientific detachment of the mug shot, by operating the cameras themselves, the Dolans, like all Face ID users, are both subject and object of the disciplinary gaze, a coincidence of roles that blurs the ‘see/being seen dyad’ that Foucault places at the heart of the disciplinary apparatus.¹⁵ Furthermore, the act of extending the arm to take a photo of yourself with a smartphone has become a visual shorthand for the extent to which bodies adapt to the affordances of our technological devices. Unlike the arrangement used in mug shots, the camera is incorporated into the body, a part of it rather than an alien entity. The Dolans alternate between emphasising the distinctness of their individual faces (‘If you look really closely, they’re a little different’) and playing up to their similarities (they frame them in the same way using identical hats). On the one hand, part of the star appeal of the Dolans is that only their followers, those who really know them, can tell them apart with ease. This dynamic reinforces the myths of individuality and is part of the process of ‘self-branding’ that is central to the digital labour of influencers.¹⁶ On the other hand, they triumph in being mistaken for ‘biometric doubles’. The apparent repetition between Ethan and Grayson’s faces pre-empt the repetition produced in the act of photographic capture by the Face ID system, a doubling that is emphasised by the split screen technique.

By foregrounding this hesitation, the twin Face ID videos evidence a tension at the heart of algorithmic image cultures more generally. They perform the paradoxes engendered by what Daniela Agostinho describes as the ‘datafication of vision’. Since ‘machine vision occurs through data, not optical means [...] vision becomes essentially post-optical’.¹⁷ And yet images and metaphors that evoke vision are everywhere. As vision becomes datafied, ‘optics is both displaced and reinstated’.¹⁸ This shift in the ontology of the photograph is reflected by its role in image-sharing social media platforms. In many ways, social media has been a vehicle for the growing influence of images in social life so that, as Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin put it, the ‘material world has sought to become “Insta-worthy” in redesigning practices, cultural institutions and material spaces’.¹⁹

However, in social media photography, the image has become computational, marking a shift away from the importance of the visual. The computational nature of the image is foregrounded with particular clarity by the photo-sharing app Instagram, which positions the metadata produced in the acts of photographic capture and distribution — from tagging to recording the time and place of upload — as being equally if not more important than the content of the images themselves. Furthermore, in the transition from taking a photograph and uploading it to your profile the manipulation of the image is a necessary stage that cannot be bypassed. In Instagram, as in computational culture more generally, there is no opting out of either ‘filtering’ or ‘editing’ the image. Alexis Madrigal points out how, since the beginning of the smartphone era, apps have offered to ‘upgrade your face’ by using algorithmic systems to produce an image of the face that statistically the user is likely to want to see.²⁰ However, unlike previous models that had a ‘flaw-eliminating beauty mode’ that you could turn on or off, the new iPhone XS range makes this ‘skin-smoothing’ feature a default. Since the photographic demands of selfie culture are a major driving force behind the technological innovations of phone manufacturer and app developers, the ‘global economy is wired up to your face’.²¹

The result of this paradox, according to Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, is that the networked image is characterised by the co-existence of two seemingly incompatible visual logics: on the one hand, a ‘rational, visual representational logic according to which the image on our screen refers to a cat somewhere in the universe’ and, on the other, ‘recursive, viral logic of intensity, multiplicity and incompleteness in which the image refers only to itself’. While photography retains an aura of representationalism and is made to speak the language of identity, as digitisation ‘breaks the chain of signifiers’ it also creates ‘an excess’ or ‘supplement’ that is ‘not representational but sensual and affective’.²² This double logic within algorithmic image cultures serves to reinforce historical identity categories while simultaneously binding us to algorithmic informational systems at a pre-individual level. Through their exploration of the iPhone X’s face-recognition system, the social media twins draw attention to the paradox of algorithmic image cultures. The seemingly double image of the Dolan twins’ faces seems to pre-empt the proliferating, decentred logic of the image in networked cultures, the simultaneous

appearance of the same image across multiple platforms. The appearance of Ethan's and Grayson's faces next to a split screen containing one of the siblings' faces within the Face ID interface presents their twinship as an embodiment of this proliferating logic. Yet, on the other hand, the twins present their faces as an obstacle to machine vision, a glitch or stumbling block in the integration of human life and algorithmic identification processes, indexing a decoupling of the image from its referent. If one sibling's face can access either of the twins' digital identities, then it ceases to be representative.

The tension between two visual logics within the twin Face ID videos foregrounds how facial recognition systems mediate between distinct systems of power. In many ways, face-recognition systems are exemplary of the emerging systems of power in digital cultures that function through a logic of market-driven modulation or control. Biometric technologies are the most efficient interfaces with digital networks and serve to embed the logic of information capitalism within the body itself. Combined with automated facial expression analysis, face-recognition technology generates the type of information necessary to the efficient functioning of a control society: information about consumer habits, patterns of spending and debt, geographical movement and the consequent affective modulations of the body. Markets have the capacity to identify patterns in this data and cater to events, crises, or desires (whether individual or transindividual) before they arise. Faces in biometric systems are reduced to patterns of digitised information (produced by the 'mapping' with infrared dots) and function not as windows onto the essential identity of the individual operator but as a point of access to information networks. As James Ash and others point out, the 'smoothness' of the interface between individuals and computer systems enabled by facial recognition technologies would enable the 'open circulations' that, according to Deleuze in his influential essay 'Postscript on the Societies of Control' ('Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle', 1990), replace the closed milieus of disciplinary power and society.²³

However, central to the success of face-recognition systems is their simultaneous appeal to both disciplinary and modulatory regimes of power and the visual logics that go with them. They seem at once extensions of criminal identification strategies rooted in the nineteenth century and emblematic of the emerging regime of modulation. As Sarah Kember puts it, facial recognition technologies 're-produce the norms of 19th-century disciplinary photography even as photography becomes allied to the security-based biopolitics of computational vision and smart algorithmic sorting'.²⁴ Recent media studies research has sought to understand why network culture, rather than ushering in a postracial or postidentitarian era in which the potential anonymity of digital interaction would free users from the constraints of social and racial identity categories, has fostered a rise in identity politics. Wendy Chun uses the term 'homophily', Greek for 'love' as 'love of the same', to describe a logic that fuels and justifies online discrimination that reproduces, entrenches, and legitimises existing forms of social segregation. This logic functions not just at the level of the echo chamber — the idea that you find what you are looking for on the Internet and have your previously held opinions or prejudices confirmed

by the opinions of others — but also at the level of what Chun calls ‘pattern discrimination’, the shoehorning of data produced by online analytics software into simplistic identity categories that reproduce ‘older’ racial and class categories.²⁵ ‘These algorithms,’ Chun states, ‘perpetuate the discrimination they “find”. They are not simply descriptive but also prescriptive and performative.’²⁶

In other words, the algorithmic logics that subtend social media, and which are facilitated by biometric interfaces, reproduce historical identity categories that legitimise social inequalities through a focus on individual habits and preferences as these are expressed through online activity.²⁷ Chun’s concept of ‘homophily’ is echoed by the work of a number of researchers who have explored the ways in which algorithmic systems, including biometric technologies, reinforce historical racism. Simone Browne, for example, has used the term ‘digital epidermalization’ to describe the role of biometric technologies in the reaffirmation of the ‘visual economy’ of race, which like Kember she also traces back to the nineteenth century, at a cultural moment when the focus on the body at the molecular level might provide the conditions for what Paul Gilroy termed a ‘postracial humanism’.²⁸ The paradox identified by Chun is present at the level of the interface through the way that Face ID (and similar systems) converts the human face to networkable digital information while reproducing the visual conventions of nineteenth-century ethnographic photography.

By performing a moment of failure, the twin Face ID videos have an unintended critical effect comparable to that of a number of artistic works that use facial recognition technologies. In her study of interventions by Thomas Ruff, Trevor Paglen, and others, Lee-Morrison argues that artistic works that engage with biometric systems do two things. On the one hand, they can ‘provide a cultural translation of the technology’ by placing it within the historical and political contexts that are occluding by tech marketing language. On the other hand, by ‘decontextualising its processes’ these artworks ‘allow for an engagement with this technology that not only problematizes its use but also imagines alternative outcomes of the technology and its processes’.²⁹ The videos by twin influencers discussed here carry out both of these gestures: they place facial recognition technologies within a fragile point of intersection between contradictory systems of representation and power while pointing to emerging positionalities at the borders of the visible.

Loss of Face

The paradox of the algorithmic image (its proliferation belying a shift away from the visual) is mirrored by the role of the face in digital culture. The omnipresence of faces in networked culture coincides with a collective loss of faith in the visage as a seat of subjectivity. Claire Colebrook argues that the technology-driven emphasis on instantaneity, disconnected emotions, and flashing screens, is rapidly producing what she describes as a ‘total loss of face’ in contemporary culture.³⁰ The ‘face’ that is being lost, according to Colebrook, is that which was described by Emmanuel

Levinas in his ethical philosophy. Faces, according to Levinas, constitute the source and provide the motivation for ethical behaviour since they provoke an ‘awakening to the precariousness of the other’, which serves as a reminder of our own state of vulnerability in the world and hence our responsibility towards one another.³¹ As Colebrook explains, Levinas’s concept of the face ‘relies on a singularity that would be liberated from all generality, that would not be a specification of this or that universal type’.³² In a social world of over-exposure to photographic depictions of others, in which we constantly swipe away faces on social media and dating apps, visages have lost their specificity and, along with it, their supposed connection to an interior reservoir of humanity. Ironically, Facebook heralded the demise of the face at the very moment of its seeming triumph. For Colebrook, one of the most visible signs of this cultural loss is the rise of the smiley face: ‘So lacking in distinction that it has neither race, nor humanity, nor artfulness, the smiley face signals loss of life’. No matter how many iterations and variations are produced by enterprising software companies, the endlessly serialised smiley face marks a ‘retreat from specification and the removal of any definitive body — anything that would allow for engaged sympathy’.³³

Twin faces proliferate within this seemingly paradoxical coincidence between the omnipresence of faces and a cultural loss of face. A growing number of apps and websites are offering to find users’ ‘twins’ by scouring the Internet for similar faces. The website *twinstrangers.net*, which, at the time of writing, has more than seven million paying subscribers, claims to be able to ‘find your lookalike from anywhere in the world’. A video uploaded to YouTube explains that ‘when you register, our AI face recognition instantly compares your photo against millions in our database finding your closest matches’. If two subscribers are matched they have the option of contacting each other. In one of the first promotional videos for the site, viewed more than nine million times on YouTube, Niamh tracks down her *doppelgänger* Karen using the Twin Strangers software. Two follow-up videos show Niamh meeting her second and third twin strangers. During her second trip to Italy, Niamh is told that she not only resembles her lookalike Luisa but shares a very similar ‘aura’. Hearing this news, Niamh breaks down in tears. The discourse surrounding Twin Strangers echoes the ambiguity of the twin social media stars. On the one hand, it seems to celebrate the cultural loss of face driven by networked image data bases. But on the other hand, it constructs the face as a site of potential ethical communication. The site promises not only to match lookalike users but facilitate a deep interpersonal connection.

One of the effects of looking at photographic images of twins is that the faces staring back at you take on a mask-like quality. Rather than just the result of monozygosity, the impression of identicalness in many images of twins is the product of a performance. In photographic stagings of identical twin identities, the sitters employ a form of mask — the depths of emotional and biological differences are occluded by a surface sameness that is presented to the camera. In Peter Zelewski’s 2018 photobook *Twins*, the photographer and the photographic subjects collude in their performance of identicalness. The supposed objective neutrality of

the camera is pre-empted by the dead-pan expressions of the twins as they present themselves as specimens that are representative of the human type announced by the book's title. One of the reasons for this mask effect may be the fact that, with many monozygotic twins, facial expression and movement — the play of emotion through their features — often breaks the spell of identicalness. Just as the machine vision of the Face ID system conflated Ethan's and Grayson's faces, when the human eye confronts a photographic portrait of identical twins for the first time, it tends to move back and forth between the two faces in search of differences on which to anchor itself. The gaze skates across the surfaces of the faces presented to Zelewski's camera just as the eye slides off the surface of a mask during a Noh performance. It is significant that the *Twin Strangers* videos all end with Niamh and her lookalike putting on make-up in an attempt to accentuate their similarities. It is only when they are made-up in the same way and assume the same affectless expressions that the uncanny effect is realised. Twinship here is literally a mask in that it is the result of artificially covering the blemishes that might draw attention to individuality.

The mask-like quality of twin faces in visual mass culture underscores the disruptive potential of the Face ID videos. Discussing state use of biometric systems during the Occupy movement, Zach Blas argues that the use of masks by protestors (including the iconic Guy Fawkes mask borrowed from David Lloyd and Alan Moore's graphic novel *V for Vendetta*) were 'forms of queer illegibility'.³⁴ These 'aesthetic and political practices of anti-normativity and anti-standardization' undermine neoliberal surveillance systems and create 'amorphous, encrypted, incalculable, excessive and weird collective stylings of bodies and environments'. These 'queer biometric failures,' Blas concludes, 'are utopian oppositions that do not cohere to state visualizations or representations; they evoke facelessness and defacement [...] and make the face a nexus of refusal, collectivization, and potentiality'. In their Face ID videos, the twin social media stars enact moments of 'biometric failure'. By performing identicalness for the camera, they construct their faces as 'natural' masks that jar with state visualisations. In the process, and despite the apparent frivolity of the videos, they point to the critical potential of twinship in defamiliarising the emerging identification systems of the digital age.

Jenny Edkins identifies a contradiction at the heart of contemporary 'face politics': 'With a shift from the modern episteme to a world of digital images' we might expect the face to be disappearing; however, in social media cultures 'the face endures as an emblem of political personhood'.³⁵ In the face of this contradiction, Edkins outlines a political strategy of 'tarrying with the precarious existence of the face: the face neither mantled nor dismantled, neither sustained nor destroyed, but rather revealed as both there and not-there, here and not-here at the same time'.³⁶ The mobilisation of twin faces as masks enacts a face that flickers between visibility and invisibility. In the process, the form of transfaciality performed by twin faces points to alternative configurations between faces and personhood.

Twin Selfies and Human-Machine Assemblages

Like most twin influencers, one of the stock visual genres employed by the Clermont twins, Shannon and Shannade, is the joint portrait using still photographic images. That many of these are self-portraits is made evident by the fact that the siblings are stood, smartphone in hand, in front of a mirror (Figure 8.2), or from what has become the defining characteristic of the selfie: the presence of an extended arm visible at the bottom of the frame. The #twinselfie both deploys and undermines the conventions of what is the most common vernacular photographic practice of the digital age, a convention that, according to Madrigal, is driving the increasingly complex use of algorithmic systems in smartphone cameras and image apps. On the one hand, the twins exploit the cultural associations between the genre of the selfie and authenticity. In contrast to some of the more staged and aesthetic photographs posted onto their profiles, whether they be model shots promoting their merchandise or the ubiquitous staged lifestyle images, the selfies are presented as unplanned and therefore windows onto the realities of their everyday lives. But, of course, the selfies are exemplary of the paradoxically highly mediated immediacy of a mode of stardom that relies on an aesthetic of authentic inauthenticity. On the other hand, as evidenced by the oxymoronic nature of the hashtag #twinselfie, the genre undermines the other key cornerstone of the selfie: the focus on the individual self. The self that the twins present in their twin selfies is a mutually entwined self, a photographic performance of the dynamic of entwinement that is central to their brand.



FIG. 8.2. The Clermont twins pose for a selfie, Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/clermont_twins_/> [accessed 20 November 2022].

The selfie has proved to be a particularly fruitful focus for the analysis of the socio-technical assemblages enabled by algorithmic photography. The photographic practice is often dismissively described in the popular press as being symptomatic of a narcissistic culture. It is easy to see how the boom of the selfie could be marshalled as evidence of a collective cultural self-obsession. The prevalence of this mode of expression seems to indicate the reduction of public discourse to what Zygmunt Bauman terms 'life politics' in which the subject, stripped of any real political agency and unable to connect his or her experience to that of the wider social field, is reduced to maintaining an illusion of agency through the exercise of market-driven lifestyle choices.³⁷ The association between twinship and incest in contemporary mass popular culture has also been described as indicative of cultural narcissism. Stephen Marche points out that, far from being taboo, incest has become a clichéd plot development in popular culture, a trope that is often played out through narratives of twins, whether they be Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia in the Star Wars franchise or Jaime and Cersei Lannister in *Game of Thrones*. Marche argues that twin incest narratives reveal that incest is really an extension of narcissism. When Siegmund and Sieglinde fall in love in *Die Walküre*, they are really falling in love with their own reflected images. Like the boom of the selfie for many of its critics, for Marche the naturalisation of the twin incest trope is indicative of societal atomisation.³⁸

But rather than reaffirm the narcissistic qualities of the selfie, its appropriation by social media twins emphasises the constitutive connection between self and information networks in digital cultures. Selfies have been attracting increasing critical attention for the light they shed on the complex forms of intersubjectivity of the digital age. Rather than reflective of the technology-driven atomisation of communities, they are more often viewed by digital media scholars as socio-technological assemblages. Aaron Hess, for example, focuses on how selfies illuminate emerging and evolving 'relationships between technology, the self, materiality, and networks' of the digital age.³⁹ The 'selfie assemblage', as he terms it, gives expression to 'the affective tensions of networked identity: the longing for authenticity through digitality, the conflicted need for fleeting connection with others, the compulsion to document ourselves in spaces and places, and the relational intimacy found with our devices'.⁴⁰ Selfies both 'announce' these tensions and act as ways of 'coping' with or reconciling them. The connection between self and networks in the twin Face ID videos evidences these tensions between desire for authenticity and meaningful interpersonal connection and an ecstatic embrace of the reduction of life to information and the production of connective metadata.

Like Hess, Paul Frosh argues that selfies should not be understood purely in visual terms, but rather for the ways in which they integrate photographic images into 'a technocultural circuit of corporeal social energy' that he terms 'kinesthetic sociability'.⁴¹ A key technological innovation that has enabled the selfie boom is the design of the smartphone. The fact that it can be easily held and operated with the same hand, that it displays an image of the 'pre-photographic scene' large enough to be viewed at arm's length, and that it has lenses on both the front and back mean

that, unlike with traditional camera design, the smartphone no longer functions as a ‘barrier between visible photographed spaces and undepicted locations of photographing and viewing’. The two main consequences of this are that ‘the space of photographic production or enunciation is effortlessly unified with the space of the picture itself’ and that ‘the unified space of production and depiction becomes a field of embodied inhabitation’ since the camera is ‘literally incorporated, part of a hand-camera assemblage’. Selfies emphasise the indexical aura surrounding photography as part of a ‘connective performance’ between gestural images and their habituated embodied responses (whether tapping the screen in approval or swiping in dismissal) rather than to authenticate ‘semantic reference’.⁴² Twin selfie photographs reproduce in microcosm the connections between bodies and technologies that constitute the ‘kinesthetic sociability’ of selfie assemblages. The genetic connections between each other’s bodies, underscored by their performed twinship, preempts the techno-corporeal circuits into which they are woven by their embedded metadata.

While the twin selfie confronts its viewer with the socio-technological assemblage that are constitutive of identity, it also foregrounds the face itself as an assemblage. While faces are actually assemblages of different elements (skin, muscle, cartilage, bone, affect, cognition etc.), cultural practices such as portraiture, have created the face as a single, unified object, detachable from its bearer and expressive of his or her essential identity. In an influential chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* (*Mille plateaux*, 1980) titled ‘Year Zero: Faciality’, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the often violent cultural imposition of unity on the facial assemblage as the ‘abstract machine of faciality’, which renders the face ‘inhuman’ by turning it into a ‘phantom’.⁴³ Gates argues that face-recognition systems are part of what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the ‘technological trajectory’ of the abstract machine of faciality. Despite the fact that, at the point of interface, systems such as Face ID reduce the face to an assemblage of contours, the social and political use of the information produced by the interface reaffirms the process of facialisation: the attachment of the image of a face to a stable individual identity. Twin faces constitute a challenge to this process. By setting the spectator’s eye in motion — whether it be a human eye or that of biometric machine vision — they deterritorialise the face. The way the eye moves back and forth across twin faces frees their features from the false unity of facialisation in a way that echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the processes of ‘dismantling’ that make ‘faciality traits themselves finally elude the organisation of the face — freckles dashing toward the horizon, hair carried off by the wind, eyes you traverse instead of seeing yourself in or gazing into those glum face-to-face encounters between signifying subjectivities’.⁴⁴ In this, they are anticipating an effect that Deleuze associates with the close-up in his later books on cinematic aesthetics. In a way that echoes this process of ‘dismantling’, cinematic close-ups of faces have the power to ‘tear the image away from spatio-temporal co-ordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed’.⁴⁵

Mark Hansen’s concept of the Digital Facial Image (DFI) is a useful point of reference for the role of twin faces in relation to the ‘faciality’ of biometric systems.

Hansen uses the term to describe aesthetic experimentations with human–computer interfaces carried out by new media artists that focus on the human face. Kirsten Geisler’s installation piece *Dream of Beauty 2.0* (1999), in which the user is invited to interact with the limited emotional and verbal range of a disembodied computer-generated face, is taken as exemplary of the way DFIs ‘draw attention to the non-seamlessness of the interface between embodied human beings and the computer’.⁴⁶ Like Deleuze’s close-up, experiments with the DFI ‘strike against late capitalist semiotic mechanisms that function specifically by reducing embodied singularity to facialized generality’. Unlike the close-up, in which the face functions as a vector of deterritorialisation — ‘a liberation of affect from the body’ — the DFI acts as a ‘catalyst for a dynamic re-embodiment of the interface’.⁴⁷ For Hansen, these experiments with what he calls the DFI hold a similar utopian potential to the mask in Blas’s account. The ‘interactive coupling’ between humans and computer systems carried out by these aesthetic experimentations, ‘catalyse the production’ of ‘new affective relations’ that are emerging at the intersection between the ‘expanded virtual domains’ of digital technologies and the virtuality of the body.

Writing in the early 2000s, Hansen could not anticipate the expansion of the range of ‘interactive coupling’ between humans and computers that would be naturalised by social media. The sheer banalisation of these human–computer interfaces through their integration into everyday life inevitably detracts from the critical potential that Hansen associated with the DFI. In many ways, social media has served to harness the potential of what Frosh called the ‘kinesthetic sociability’ of selfie networks to the development of brand assemblages (a term used by Celia Lury).⁴⁸ The jarring genre of the twin selfie, I argue, restores some of this critical potential. The ‘hesitation’ that twin selfies introduce into selfie culture draws attention to the socio-technological assemblages that are constitutive of identity and irreducible to the imposition of identity categories carried out by algorithmic systems and their operative logic of ‘pattern discrimination’.

The Clermont twins’ articulation of the twin selfie with Afrofuturist aesthetics is particularly provocative. Since coming to fame through the 2015 reality television show *Bad Girls Club*, Shannon and Shannade Clermont have developed a huge social media following and modelling career. Their aesthetic is dominated by two intertwining tropes: the symmetry of ‘identical’ twinship and a punk futurism expressed in silver lamé clothing, robotic affectless facial expressions, and conspicuous body modifications. In the video for Nicki Minaj’s 2018 hit ‘Good Form’, the sisters featured as a pair of symmetrical android servants, dancing in the background and performing as human stools. A feature in *i-D* magazine from the same year was illustrated with photographs of the twins in long silver hair and oversized mirror shades striding across a futuristic desert landscape. The Afrofuturist aesthetic frames the way in which they navigate social media, underscoring the fact that their bodies are reconfigured by the affordances of network technologies.

In *Afrofuturism 2.0* (2017), Reynaldo Anderson and Charles Jones argue that Afrofuturist aesthetics in the twenty-first century are used to explore the ‘technogenesis’ of black identity in an area of transnational digital networks.⁴⁹ The trope

of Afrofuturist twinning in particular has been used to speculate about emerging transcorporeal configurations of information and media by artists and authors of speculative fiction such as French dance duo Les Twins, Tade Thompson and Nalo Hopkinson.⁵⁰ Daniela Agostinho has identified Afrofuturism as a tool with which artists ‘compel us to rethink and possibly expand the notion of visibility’ in the context of datafication in which ‘visibility as a regime of algorithmic structuring coexists with the notion of visibility as a political site for subject formation, justice claims and resistance’.⁵¹ The Afrofuturist twin selfies are strategies for mediating between these two regimes of visibility. On the one hand, by employing an aesthetic that has been popularised by some of the most successful female black musicians of the age (from Beyoncé to Janelle Monáe) the Clermont twins are maximising the potential of their images and videos to be ‘surfaced’ by algorithmic search engines. It is a strategy of commercial visibility. But on the other hand, Afrofuturist aesthetics are employed to intervene into the role of race in structuring the visual field. As Browne has shown, black bodies have historically been rendered highly visible by surveillance systems while paradoxically being invisibilised politically, denied access to the categories of political personhood and the full status of the human. The Afrofuturist twin selfie enacts a double displacement of the liberal subject: presenting the twins as entangled both with each other’s bodies and the digital networks of social media. They claim visibility in order to divert its attention away from dominant categories of the subject towards alternative configurations of bodies and images.

Conclusion

In *Cannibal Metaphysics* (2014), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro uses twins as a model for the concept of dynamic difference that is at the heart of what it means to be human within Amerindian thought. In Amerindian cosmologies, he claims, twins are used as a model not of sameness or symmetry but as a model of the ‘dynamic difference’ and ‘perpetual disequilibrium’ that are the driving motors of life.⁵² Amerindian thought embraces the idea that difference ‘only blooms to its full conceptual power when it becomes as slight as can be: like the difference between twins’.⁵³ In the examples explored in this article, twinship and twinning constitute points of failure in biometric technologies — failures that, to repeat Parikka’s point, reveal hidden logics at work within these systems. In this case, I argue, the ‘failure’ of twinship and twinning is deployed to expose a state of ‘dynamic disequilibrium’ within algorithmic image cultures. This differential logic runs against the grain of the algorithmic reproduction and policing of social sameness, the archival logic that Chun terms ‘homophily’ and therefore constitutes a powerful force of the counter-archival. Just as, for Viveiros de Castro, twins embody a form of dualism that is never stable and unchanging but rather constantly transformed by movements of recursion, involution, and convolution, the performances of twinship discussed here introduce an instability into the oppositions that govern networked image culture: between visibility and invisibility; representation and intensity; bodies and networks.

Notes to Chapter 8

1. Other consumer tech reviewers employed similar strategies with different results. Tech Insider, for instance, tested the system using thirty-six-year-old twin brothers and concluded: 'You can't fool the iPhone X'. But the majority of 'Twin Tests' posted on YouTube found that identical twin faces could unlock each other's phones. When one twin unlocks his brother's phone on a video posted by Mashable, his sibling responds: 'Don't steal my data, no! [...]. The iPhone X is not twin compatible'.
2. Lisa Zunshine, *Strange Concepts and the Stories They Make Possible* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 35.
3. Lila Lee-Morrison, *Portraits of Automated Facial Recognition: On Machinic Ways of Seeing the Face* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), p. 45.
4. Kelly A. Gates, *Our Biometric Future: Facial Recognition Technology and the Culture of Surveillance* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2011), p. 14.
5. William Viney, 'Getting the Measure of Twins', in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*, ed. by Anne Whitehead and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 104–19 (p. 107).
6. Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October*, 39 (1986), 3–64 (p. 55).
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 29.
8. See Kevin W. Bowyer and Patrick J. Flynn, 'Biometric Identification of Identical Twins: A Survey', Department of Computer Science and Engineering, University of Notre Dame, 2016 <https://www3.nd.edu/~kwb/Bowyer_Flynn_BTAS_2016.pdf> [accessed 15 November 2018].
9. Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses: Second Edition* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), p. xxxiii.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Grant Bollmer, *Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 7.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
15. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 201.
16. See Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling, 'Self-Branding, "Micro-Celebrity" and the Rise of Social Media Influencers', *Celebrity Studies*, 8.2 (2017), 191–208.
17. Daniela Agostinho, 'The Optical Unconscious of Big Data: Datafication of Vision and Care for Unknown Futures', *Big Data & Society*, (2019), 1–10 (p. 2)
18. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
19. Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), ebook.
20. Alexis C. Madrigal, 'No, You Don't Really Look Like That', *The Atlantic*, 16 December 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/12/your-iphone-selfies-dont-look-like-your-face/578353/>> [accessed 6 February 2019].
21. *Ibid.*
22. Daniel Rubinstein, and Katrina Sluis, 'The Digital Image in Photographic Culture: Algorithmic Photography and the Crisis of Representation', in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture*, ed. by Martin Lister, 2nd edn (London & New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 22–40 (p. 35).
23. James Ash and others, 'Digital Interface Design and Power: Friction, Threshold, Transition', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 36.6 (2018), 1136–53 (p. 1139). Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', in *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. by Martin Joughlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 177–82.
24. Sarah Kember, 'Face Recognition and the Emergence of Smart Photography', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13.2 (2014), 182–99 (p. 193).
25. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 'Queering Homophily', in *Pattern Discrimination*, ed. by Clemens Apprich and others (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), pp. 59–97 (p. 75).

26. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
27. In a tweet critiquing the marketing discourse behind the machine learning biometrics firm Faception: Facial Personality Analytics, Ben Snyder comments: 'Today in shitty machine learning start-ups, this company claims to predict IQ, personality, and violent tendencies by applying deep learning to facial features and bone structure. That's phrenology. You just made the ML equivalent of a racist uncle': Twitter (now X), 20 November 2018.
28. Simone Browne, 'Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity and Biometrics', *Critical Sociology*, 36.1 (2009), 131–50 (p. 132); and Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 37.
29. Lee-Morrison, *Portraits of Automated Facial Recognition*, p. 19.
30. Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2014), p. 150.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
34. Zach Blas, 'Escaping the Face: Biometric Facial Recognition and the Facial Weaponization Suite', *Media-N*, 9.2 (2013) <<http://median.newmediacaucus.org/caa-conference-edition-2013/escaping-the-face-biometric-facial-recognition-and-the-facial-weaponization-suite/>> [accessed 18 April 2023].
35. Jenny Edkins, *Face Politics* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 3.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
37. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 51–52.
38. Stephen Marche, 'On the Return of the Incest Aesthetic in Culture', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 22 August 2018 <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/return-incest-aesthetic-in-culture-essay-stephen-marche/>> [accessed 13 December 2023].
39. Aaron Hess, 'The Selfie Assemblage', *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015), 1629–46 (p. 1630).
40. *Ibid.*, p. 1631.
41. Paul Frosh, 'The Gestural Image: The Selfie, Photography Theory, and Kinesthetic Sociability', *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015), 1607–26 (p. 1608).
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 1611, 1612, 1609.
43. Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 187.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 189–90.
45. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 96.
46. Mark Hansen, 'Affect as Medium, or the "Digital-Facial-Image"', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2.2 (2003), 205–28 (p. 206).
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 208–09.
48. See Celia Lury, 'Brand as Assemblage', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 2.1–2 (2009), 67–82.
49. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, 'Introduction: The Rise of Astro-Blackness', in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, ed. by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (New York: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. vii–xvii (p. viii).
50. For a discussion of the trope of twinning in Afrofuturist aesthetics see Edward King, *Twins and Recursion in Digital, Literary and Visual Cultures* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).
51. Daniela Agostinho, 'Chroma Key Dreams: Algorithmic Visibility, Fleishy Images and Scenes of Recognition', *Philosophy of Photography*, 9.2 (2018), 131–55 (p. 132).
52. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, trans. and ed. by Peter Skafish (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014), p. 154.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 59. Viveiros de Castro develops this concept through his re-interpretation of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Story of Lynx* as a work of post-structuralist anthropology *avant-la-lettre*. In the book, Lévi-Strauss presents myths about twins as keys to understanding cultural systems.

