Facial Recognition and Eighteenth-Century Afterlives

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During the 2016 Republican National convention in Cleveland, at which Donald Trump would receive his party's nomination, conservative provocateur Charles Johnson and Clearview Ai creator Hoan Ton-That shared an AirBnB:

> While Johnson and Ton-That hung out at the rental house, they mused about discredited sciences that could be explored in the modern age with new technologies. At one point, the conversation turned to physiognomy, the pseudoscientific judgment of a person's character based on their facial features. "Hoan played music," Johnson said. "We all drank a lot." He added, "That was where a lot of ideas that became Smartcheckr, and then Clearview, began."[1]

Ton-That's Clearview Ai came to prominence in 2020 as alarming reports detailed its expansive capabilities in facial recognition and its database of faceprints scraped from social media sites. Used by law enforcement and other government agencies, Clearview Ai poses perhaps the greatest threat to privacy as it promises to identify anyone on their image alone. That its origins lie in the eighteenth-century pseudoscience of physiognomy is especially intriguing.

Ton-That is not alone in his embrace of physiognomy. Indeed, recently many from the tech elite and far right have embraced physiognomy as the next biometric frontier. What I want to argue in this paper, however, is that physiognomy and a whole host of aesthetic and anti-Black thought from the eighteenth century is *already* baked into facial recognition algorithms. Typical stories about the origins of facial recognition begin with the advent of photography and the mug shot, invented by Alphonse Bertillon in 1888. I begin more than a century earlier and consider the face in aesthetic treatises like William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) and Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the visual culture of the long eighteenth century, including Josiah Wedgwood's anti-slavery medallion, and Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1775-8).

I trace a history of aesthetic thinking and image-making that produces anti-Blackness in standards of the beautiful by normalizing lighting that makes white faces visible and pleasing, while rendering Black faces nearly invisible. This same aesthetic thinking and image-making further places abstraction and reduction at the core of the production of beauty. Hogarth asked his readers to imagine the human face made of series of lines; Lavater developed an algorithmic and reductionist mode of approaching the human face to analyze its character. Well before images of faces could be subjected to statistical analysis, these artists and philosophers sought to understand the human face in abstract, geometrical terms. This abstraction renders the face metaphorical; "face" no longer simply refers to the front part of a person's head, but to the lines that are said to compose it and the data extracted from it. The afterlives of these strands of thought shapes everything from the FaceID found on Apple IPhones to the facial recognition technology Police use to (often incorrectly) identify suspects.

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[1] Hill, Kashmir. "What Happens When Our Faces Are Tracked Everywhere We Go?" *The New York Times*, March 18, 2021, sec. Magazine. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/03/18/magazine/facial-recognition-clearview-ai.html.