

Platform AI Art and the Naturalization of Facial Recognition

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Abstract

This presentation outlines my current research on the relationship between AI art practices promoted by social media platforms and the naturalization of facial recognition technologies. While recognising the top-down implications of these technologies in terms of social reduction and surveillance, I also wish to assess their potential for a tactical reclamation by their users.

While it has been demonstrated that the deployment of facial recognition technologies by authorities has dangerous implications in terms of surveillance and bias (Buolamwini & Gebru 2018), the naturalization of the same technologies is happening through banal applications on social media. In this respect, I wish to focus on Facebook as the centre of a platform ecology that is playing a crucial role in the definition of AR art for the mainstream public. The company owns in fact both Instagram and Spark AR: the former allows users to deploy facial recognition-driven “filters” in its popular Stories feature, the latter is a free software for the creation of customized AR applications (mostly filters). They have also been investing in technologies to create lifelike avatars (Tech@Facebook 2019).

Rather than focusing on biometric data as a privacy issue, I wish to center my research on how the socio-technical environment delineated by the convergence of Facebook’s infrastructure, Instagram-driven identity models, and Spark AR as a creative technology shapes the development of facial recognition as a mass cultural phenomenon. In particular, I want to emphasize how this negotiation happens through practices that are explicitly framed as creative and even artistic.

Facebook has in fact very explicitly been promoting Spark AR as an art-orientated technology: they have presented a Spark AR-

powered augmented reality exhibition at Tate Britain (Tech@Facebook 2019), while the Spark AR blog regularly showcases artists or designers who use their software.

Per se, the embeddedness of face filters within the Facebook-Instagram-Spark AR ecology does not contradict the status of much of what has been termed “AI art” in recent years. In fact, highlighting how much of machine learning-driven artworks are funded and developed alongside big players in the tech industry, Zylinska (2020 75) argues much of it is effectively already “platform art.” My focus, then, will be on assessing how much critical freedom is afforded to filter artists, what type of original cultural forms might emerge from AR- and facial recognition-powered platform art, and what socio-cultural tensions these new formats engage with. The most evident tension is the coexistence of a corporate infrastructure imbued with a neoliberal ethos—which encourages active posting (Docherty 2020) and commodifies user identities (Lim 2020)—and the potential for critical self-reflection that is inherent to media art practice (Stark & Crawford 2019). Other interesting angles are framing face filters in the context of animation and racial stereotyping (Stark 2018) or the use of protest-themed filters as “memetic signifiers” (Gerbaudo, 2015)—among the categories that creators can use to classify their filters is in fact popular “causes,” which suggests the possibility of political commitment.

By discussing relevant literature, as well as specific examples of AR-filter-based art and critical media art addressing facial recognition in other technical environments, my presentation will thus address the following questions: can the face filters and virtual avatars emerging from the triangulation of Facebook, Instagram, and Spark AR become forms of

“tactical media” (Garcia & Lovink 1997) that leverage the technical environment they are embedded within to generate critical responses to it? Can they evolve into forms of critical computing, “phantasmal media” (Harrell, 2013) that work towards the transformation of dangerous stereotypes into more multi-faceted, emancipatory identity templates?

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Biography

Nicola Bozzi is a researcher and freelance writer contributing to international publications like Frieze, Domus, and Wired Italia. His main research interests are globalized identities and the role of art in society. He also has a newsletter about comedy, media, and culture titled Letdown Comedy. You can follow him on Twitter as @schizocities.