



The algorithmic colonization of the human face: beauty, bias, and the digital guillotine

Salih Kılıç¹

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Dear Editor,

Let us cut through the algorithmic fog. That innocuous-looking app or “cutting-edge” clinic software promising to enhance beauty is not a tool—it is a digital colonizer annexing our most intimate territory: self-perception. Facial analysis AI, draped in the lab coat of scientific objectivity, is phrenology rebooted for the 21st century. Today, high-end esthetic clinics from Seoul to São Paulo have traded nuanced patient dialog for algorithmic assessments. A glowing screen now dictates how your nose deviates from a “Caucasian ideal,” or how your jawline lacks “angularity.” Ethnically distinct features are flagged as defects. Surgeons, once artists of individuality, are reduced to technicians. The consultation room becomes a tribunal, and the algorithm the judge, jury, and executioner.

The industry’s narrative of “neutrality” and “personalization” is gaslighting. Studies, such as those by Gunes and Piccardi (2006), have shown that AI-driven systems reduce beauty to a formula of facial proportions—ratios learned from biased datasets and Western ideals. These systems rigidly define beauty: white, slim, youthful, Eurocentric. Everyone else is categorized as “deviation” or worse, “esthetic error.” Tech giants manufacture insecurity, offer solutions through partnerships and filters, and reap profits from the anxiety they create. Clinics sell algorithmic precision as a premium service, while platforms deploy beauty filters and “attractiveness” scores that groom a generation to internalize deficiency. This is not empowerment; it is esthetic authoritarianism.

The poison seeps far beyond the clinic. In homes, classrooms, and on millions of phones, the algorithm becomes a quiet tyrant, whispering that your face is not good enough.

Adolescents upload filtered selfies shaped by machine-learned ideals. Platforms reward conformity with likes, attention, and dopamine. Beauty ceases to be felt or culturally shared—it becomes a KPI. We are not fostering self-confidence or authentic expression; we are manufacturing cosmetic compliance. And this compliance, once internalized, makes future generations more docile, more malleable, and more profitable. As a recent cross-national study demonstrates, perceptions of facial analysis AI vary significantly across cultural contexts—from Argentina to Kenya to Japan and the USA (Ullstein et al., 2024).

Calls for dataset diversification are a sophisticated distraction. Adding variety to a flawed system only widens the net of judgment. It’s akin to diversifying a kangaroo court—the process remains illegitimate. The true violence lies in the act of quantification itself: the reduction of culturally rich and historically situated beauty into data points. The esthetic AI industry echoes the pseudo-scientific legacies of phrenology, eugenics, and colonial anthropometry. Same logic, new tools: objectify, measure, rank, enforce. This lineage is not alarmist conjecture; it is historical continuity.

We cannot afford historical amnesia. In the nineteenth century, skull bumps justified racism. In the twentieth, eugenics masqueraded as science. In the 21st, deep learning sorts faces into esthetic categories with surgical precision. Agarwal et al. (2025)’s recent study shows how even writing style suggestions in AI systems increasingly nudge global users toward Westernized norms—flattening nuance, erasing diversity. Imagine the stakes when this dynamic targets the human face.

What is at stake is not cosmetic preference but cultural and psychologic sovereignty. These systems erode individual autonomy by outsourcing beauty to opaque algorithms. They commodify insecurity into a business model and perpetuate systemic bias under a guise of mathematical legitimacy. Young people grow up with the algorithmic gaze whispering that their worth is externally defined and perpetually insufficient. Meanwhile, plastic surgery risks becoming a field of

✉ Salih Kılıç
salih.kilic@balikesir.edu.tr

¹ Department of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery, Balıkesir University, Balıkesir, Turkey

conformity rather than care. Surgeons chasing algorithmic metrics abandon their oath to do no harm. Artistry yields to standardization. Patients become data points.

Policymakers dawdle. Clinic owners chase the next tech fad. Tech firms hide behind proprietary code. And the burden falls on the already vulnerable individual. Ethical band-aids like fairness algorithms or diverse data are insufficient when the foundation is rotten. We do not need more inclusive beauty AI. We need to reject the premise entirely. Beauty is not symmetry, data, or conformity. It is messy, diverse, and magnificently human. No machine will ever define it.

Let's be clear: we do not need better esthetic AI—we need an esthetic insurgency. Surgeons must reclaim their role as empathetic collaborators, not algorithmic executors. Educators must teach critical literacy that dismantles the algorithmic gaze. Regulators must recognize this technology as a public health concern. And each of us must resist, fiercely and collectively. Debug your warped worldview. My face is not your data.

Curmudgeon Corner Curmudgeon Corner is a short opinionated column on trends in technology, arts, science and society, commenting on issues of concern to the research community and wider society. Whilst the drive for super-human intelligence promotes potential benefits to wider society, it also raises deep concerns of existential risk, thereby highlighting the need for an ongoing conversation between technology and society. At the core of Curmudgeon concern is the question: What is it to be human in the age of the AI machine? -Editor.

Author contribution S.K. conceived the main conceptual framework and wrote the initial manuscript draft. S.K. conducted the literature

review, developed the critical arguments, and structured the philosophical and historical comparisons.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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