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DECADE IN REVIEW

## THE AGE OF INSTAGRAM FACE

*How social media, FaceTune, and plastic surgery created a single, cyborgian look.*

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This past summer, I booked a plane ticket to Los Angeles with the hope of investigating what seems likely to be one of the oddest legacies of our rapidly expiring decade: the gradual emergence, among professionally beautiful women, of a single, cyborgian face. It's a young face, of course, with poreless skin and plump, high cheekbones. It has catlike eyes and long, cartoonish lashes; it has a small, neat nose and full, lush lips. It looks at you coyly but blankly, as if its owner has taken half a Klonopin and is considering asking you for a private-jet ride to Coachella. The face is distinctly white but ambiguously ethnic—it suggests a *National Geographic* composite illustrating what Americans will look like in 2050, if every American of the future were to be a

direct descendant of Kim Kardashian West, Bella Hadid, Emily Ratajkowski, and Kendall Jenner (who looks exactly like Emily Ratajkowski). “It’s like a sexy . . . baby . . . tiger,” Cara Craig, a high-end New York colorist, observed to me recently. The celebrity makeup artist Colby Smith told me, “It’s Instagram Face, duh. It’s like an unrealistic sculpture. Volume on volume. A face that looks like it’s made out of clay.”

Instagram, which launched as the decade was just beginning, in October, 2010, has its own aesthetic language: the ideal image is always the one that instantly pops on a phone screen. The aesthetic is also marked by a familiar human aspiration, previously best documented in wedding photography, toward a generic sameness. Accounts such as [Insta Repeat](#) illustrate the platform’s monotony by posting grids of indistinguishable photos posted by different users—a person in a yellow raincoat standing at the base of a waterfall, or a hand holding up a bright fall leaf. Some things just perform well.

The human body is an unusual sort of Instagram subject: it can be adjusted, with the right kind of effort, to perform better and better over time. Art directors at magazines have long [edited photos](#) of celebrities to better match unrealistic beauty standards; now you can do that to pictures of yourself with just a few taps on your phone. Snapchat, which launched in 2011 and was originally known as a purveyor of disappearing messages, has maintained its user base in large part by providing photo filters, some of which allow you to become intimately familiar with what your face would look like if it were ten-per-cent more conventionally attractive—if it were [thinner](#), or had smoother skin, larger eyes, fuller lips. Instagram has added an array of flattering selfie filters to its Stories feature. FaceTune, which was released in 2013 and promises to help you “wow your friends with every selfie,” enables even more precision. A number of Instagram accounts are dedicated to identifying the tweaks that celebrities make to their features with photo-editing apps. [Celeb Face](#), which has more than a million followers, posts photos from the accounts of celebrities, adding arrows to spotlight signs of careless FaceTuning. Follow Celeb Face for a month, and this constant perfecting process begins to seem both mundane and pathological. You get the feeling that these women, or their assistants, alter photos out of a simple defensive reflex, as if FaceTuning your jawline were the Instagram equivalent of checking your eyeliner in the bathroom of the bar.

“I think ninety-five per cent of the most-followed people on Instagram use FaceTune, easily,” Smith told me. “And I would say that ninety-five per cent of these people have also had some sort of cosmetic procedure. You can see things getting trendy—like, everyone’s getting brow lifts via Botox now. Kylie Jenner didn’t used to have that sort of space around her eyelids, but now she does.”

Twenty years ago, plastic surgery was a fairly dramatic intervention: expensive, invasive, permanent, and, often, risky. But, in 2002, the Food and Drug Administration approved Botox for use in preventing wrinkles; a few years later, it approved hyaluronic-acid fillers, such as Juvéderm and Restylane, which at first filled in fine lines and wrinkles and now can be used to restructure jawlines, noses, and cheeks. These procedures last for six months to a year and aren’t nearly as expensive as surgery. (The average price per syringe of filler is [six hundred and eighty-three dollars](#).) You can go get Botox and then head right back to the office.

A class of celebrity plastic surgeons has emerged on Instagram, posting time-lapse videos of injection procedures and before-and-after photos, which receive hundreds of thousands of views and likes. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, Americans received more than seven million neurotoxin injections in 2018, and more than two and a half million filler injections. That year, Americans spent \$16.5 billion on cosmetic surgery; ninety-two per cent of these procedures were [performed on women](#). Thanks to injectables, cosmetic procedures are no longer just for people who want huge changes, or who are deep in battle with

the aging process—they're for millennials, or even, in rarefied cases, members of Gen Z. Kylie Jenner, who was born in 1997, spoke on her reality-TV show "Life of Kylie" about wanting to get lip fillers after a boy commented on her small lips when she was fifteen.

Ideals of female beauty that can only be met through painful processes of physical manipulation have always been with us, from tiny feet in imperial China to wasp waists in nineteenth-century Europe. But contemporary systems of continual visual self-broadcasting—reality TV, social media—have created new disciplines of continual visual self-improvement. Social media has supercharged the propensity to regard one's personal identity as a potential source of profit—and, especially for young women, to regard one's body this way, too. In October, Instagram announced that it would be removing "all effects associated with plastic surgery" from its filter arsenal, but this appears to mean all effects *explicitly* associated with plastic surgery, such as the ones called "Plastica" and "Fix Me." Filters that give you Instagram Face will remain. For those born with assets—natural assets, capital assets, or both—it can seem sensible, even automatic, to think of your body the way that a McKinsey consultant would think about a corporation: identify underperforming sectors and remake them, discard whatever doesn't increase profits and reorient the business toward whatever does.

Smith first started noticing the encroachment of Instagram Face about five years ago, "when the lip fillers started," he said. "I'd do someone's makeup and notice that there were no wrinkles in the lips at all. Every lipstick would go on so smooth." It has made his job easier, he noted, archly. "My job used to be to make people look like that, but now people come to me already looking like that, because they're surgically enhanced. It's great. We used to have to contour you to give you those cheeks, but now you just went out and got them."

There was something strange, I said, about the racial aspect of Instagram Face—it was as if the algorithmic tendency to flatten everything into a composite of greatest hits had resulted in a beauty ideal that favored white women capable of manufacturing a look of rootless exoticism. "Absolutely," Smith said. "We're talking an overly tan skin tone, a South Asian influence with the brows and eye shape, an African-American influence with the lips, a Caucasian influence with the nose, a cheek structure that is predominantly Native American and Middle Eastern." Did Smith think that Instagram Face was actually making people look better? He did. "People are absolutely getting prettier," he said. "The world is so visual right now, and it's only getting more visual, and people want to upgrade the way they relate to it."

This was an optimistic way of looking at the situation. I told Smith that I couldn't shake the feeling that technology is rewriting our bodies to correspond to its own interests—rearranging our faces according to whatever increases engagement and likes. "Don't you think it's scary to imagine people doing this forever?" I asked.

"Well, yeah, it's *obviously* terrifying," he said.

**B**everly Hills is L.A.'s plastic-surgery district. In the sun-scorched isosceles triangle between the palm trees and department stores of Wilshire and the palm trees and boutique eateries of Santa Monica, there's a doctor, or several, on every block. On a Wednesday afternoon, I parked my rental car in a tiny underground lot, emerged next to a Sprinkles Cupcakes and a bougie psychic's office, and walked to a consultation appointment I had made with one of the best-known celebrity plastic surgeons, whose before-and-after Instagram videos frequently attract half a million views.

I'd booked the consultation because I was curious about the actual experience of a would-be millennial patient—a fact I had to keep mentioning to my boyfriend, who seemed moderately worried that I would come back looking like a human cat. A few weeks before, I had downloaded Snapchat for the first time and tried out the filters, which were in fact very flattering: they gave me radiant skin, doe lashes, a face shaped like a heart. It wasn't lost on me that when I put on a lot of makeup I am essentially trying to create a version of this face. And it wasn't hard for me to understand why millennial women who were born within spitting distance of Instagram Face would want to keep drawing closer to it. In a world where women are rewarded for youth and beauty in a way that they are rewarded for nothing else—and where a strain of mainstream feminism teaches women that self-objectification is progressive, because it's profitable—cosmetic work might seem like one of the few guaranteed high-yield projects that a woman could undertake.

The plastic surgeon's office was gorgeous and peaceful, a silvery oasis. A receptionist, humming along to “I Want to Know What Love Is,” handed me intake forms, which asked about stress factors and mental health, among other things. I signed an arbitration agreement. A medical assistant took photos of my face from five different angles. A medical consultant with lush hair and a deeply warm, caring aura came into the room. Careful not to lie, and lightly alarmed by the fact that I didn't need to, I told her that I'd never gotten fillers or Botox but that I was interested in looking better, and that I wanted to know what experts would advise. She was complimentary, and told me that I shouldn't get too much done. After a while, she suggested that maybe I would want to pay attention to my chin as I aged, and maybe my cheeks, too—maybe I'd want to lift them a little bit.

Then the celebrity doctor came in, giving off the intensity of a surgeon and the focus of a glassblower. I said to him, too, that I was just interested in looking better, and wanted to know what an expert would recommend. I showed him one of my filtered Snapchat photos. He glanced at it, nodded, and said, “Let me show you what we could do.” He took a photo of my face on his phone and projected it onto a TV screen on the wall. “I like to use FaceTune,” he said, tapping and dragging.

Within a few seconds, my face was shaped to match the Snapchat photo. He took another picture of me, in profile, and FaceTuned the chin again. I had a heart-shaped face, and visible cheekbones. All of this was achievable, he said, with chin filler, cheek filler, and perhaps an ultrasound procedure that would dissolve the fat in the lower half of my cheeks—or we could use Botox to paralyze and shrink my masseter muscles.

I asked the doctor what he told people who came to see him wanting to look like his best-known patients. “People come in with pictures of my most famous clients all the time,” he said. “I say, ‘I can't turn you into them. I can't, if you're Asian, give you a Caucasian face, or I could, but it wouldn't be right—it wouldn't look right.’ But if they show me a specific feature they want then I can work with that. I can say, ‘If you want a sharp jaw like that, we can do that.’ But, also, these things are not always right for all people. For you, if you came in asking for a sharp jaw, I would say no—it would make you look masculine.”

“Does it seem like more people my age are coming in for this sort of work?” I asked.

“I think that ten years ago it was seen as anti-cerebral to do this,” he said. “But now it's empowering to do something that gives you an edge. Which is why young people are coming in. They come in to enhance something, rather than coming in to fix something.”

“And it's subtle,” I said.

“Even with my most famous clients, it’s very subtle,” the doctor said. “If you look at photos taken five years apart, you can tell the difference. But, day to day, month to month, you can’t.”

I felt that I was being listened to very carefully. I thanked him, sincerely, and then a medical assistant came in to show me the recommendations and prices: injectables in my cheeks (\$5,500 to \$6,900), injectables in my chin (same price), an ultrasound “lipofreeze” to fix the asymmetry in my jawline (\$8,900 to \$18,900), or Botox in the TMJ region (\$2,500). I walked out of the clinic into the Beverly Hills sunshine, laughing a little, imagining what it’d be like to have a spare thirty thousand dollars on hand. I texted photos of my FaceTuned jaw to my friends and then touched my actual jaw, a suddenly optional assemblage of flesh and bone.

The plastic surgeon Jason Diamond was a recurring star of the reality show “Dr. 90210” and has a number of famous clients, including the twenty-nine-year-old “Vanderpump Rules” star Lala Kent, who has posted photos taken in Diamond’s office on Instagram, and who told *People*, “I’ve had every part of my face injected.” Another client is Kim Kardashian West, whom Colby Smith described to me as “patient zero” for Instagram Face. (“Ultimately, the goal is always to look like Kim,” he said.) Kardashian West, who has inspired countless cosmetically altered doppelgängers, insists that she hasn’t had major plastic surgery; according to her, it’s all just Botox, fillers, and makeup. But she also hasn’t tried to hide how her appearance has changed. In 2015, she published a coffee-table book of selfies, called “Selfish,” which begins when she is beautiful the way a human is beautiful and ends when she’s beautiful in the manner of a computer animation.

I scheduled an interview with Diamond, whose practice occupies the penthouse of a building in Beverly Hills. On the desk in his office was a thank-you note from Chrissy Teigen. (It sat atop two of her cookbooks.) As with the doctor I’d seen the day before, Diamond, who has pool-blue eyes and wore black scrubs and square-framed glasses, looked nothing like the tabloid caricature of a plastic surgeon. He was youthful in a way that was only slightly surreal.

Diamond had trained with an old guard of top L.A. plastic surgeons, he told me—people who thought it was taboo to advertise. When, in 2004, he had the opportunity to appear on “Dr. 90210,” he decided to do it, against the advice of his wife and his nurses, because, he said, “I knew that I would be able to show results that the world had never seen.” In 2016, a famous client persuaded him to set up an Instagram account. He now has just under a quarter million followers. The employees at his practice who run the account like that Instagram allows patients to see him as a father of two and as a friend, not only as a doctor.

Diamond had long had a Web site, but in the past his celebrity patients didn’t volunteer to offer testimonials there. “And, of course, we never asked,” he said. “But now—it’s amazing. Maybe thirty per cent of the celebrities I take care of will just ask and offer to shout us out on social media. All of a sudden, it’s popular knowledge that all these people are coming here. For some reason, Instagram made it more acceptable.” Cosmetic work had come to seem more like fitness, he suggested. “I think it’s become much more mainstream to think about taking care of your face and your body as part of your general well-being. It’s kind of understood now: it’s O.K. to try to look your best.”

There was a sort of cleansing, crystalline honesty to this high-end intersection of superficiality and pragmatism, I was slowly realizing. I hadn’t needed to bother posing as a patient—these doctors spent all day making sure that people no longer felt they had anything to hide.

I asked Diamond if he had thoughts about Instagram Face. “You know, there’s this look—this Bella Hadid, Kim Kardashian, Kylie Jenner thing that seems to be spreading,” I said. Diamond said that he practiced all over the world, and that there were different regional preferences, and that no one template worked for every face. “But there are constants,” he said. “Symmetry, proportion, harmony. We are always trying to create balance in the face. And when you look at Kim, Megan Fox, Lucy Liu, Halle Berry, you’ll find elements in common: the high contoured cheekbones, the strong projected chin, the flat platform underneath the chin that makes a ninety-degree angle.”

“What do you make of the fact that it’s much more possible now for people to look at these celebrity faces and think, somewhat correctly, that they could look like that, too?” I asked.

“We could spend two whole days discussing that question,” Diamond said. “I’d say that thirty per cent of people come in bringing a photo of Kim, or someone like Kim—there’s a handful of people, but she’s at the very top of the list, and understandably so. It’s one of the biggest challenges I have, educating the person about whether it’s reasonable to try to move along that path toward Kim’s face, or toward whoever. Twenty years of practice, thousands and thousands of procedures, go into each individual answer—when I can do it, when I can’t do it, and when we can do something but shouldn’t, for any number of reasons.” I told Diamond that I was afraid that if I ever tried injectables, I’d never stop. “It is true that the vast majority of our patients absolutely love their results, and they come back,” he said.

We talked about the word “addiction.” I said that I dyed my hair and wore makeup most days, and that I knew I would continue to dye my hair and spend money on makeup, and that I didn’t consider this an addiction but a choice. (I thought about a line from the book *“Perfect Me,”* by the philosopher Heather Widdows: “Choice cannot make an unjust or exploitative practice or act somehow, magically, just or non-exploitative.”) I asked Diamond if his patients felt more like themselves after getting work done.

“I can answer that in part because I do these things, too,” he said, gesturing to his face. “You know when you get a really good haircut, and you feel like the best version of yourself? This is that feeling, but exponential.”

On the way to Diamond’s office, I had passed a café that looked familiar: pale marble-topped tables, blond-wood floors, a row of Prussian-green snake plants, pendant lamps, geometrically patterned tiles. The writer Kyle Chayka has coined the term *“AirSpace”* for this style of blandly appealing interior design, marked by an “anesthetized aesthetic” and influenced by the “connective emotional grid of social media platforms”—these virtual spaces where hundreds of millions of people learn to “see and feel and want the same things.” *WeWork*, the collapsing co-working giant—which, like Instagram, was founded in 2010—once convinced investors of a forty-seven-billion-dollar vision in which people would follow their idiosyncratic dreams while enmeshed in a global network of near-indistinguishable office spaces featuring reclaimed wood, neon signs, and ficus trees. Direct-to-consumer brands fill podcast ad breaks with promises of the one true electric toothbrush and meals that arrive in the mail, selling us on the relief of forgoing choice altogether. The general idea seems to be that humans are so busy pursuing complicated forms of self-actualization that we’d like much of our life to be assembled for us, as if from a kit.

I went to see another Beverly Hills plastic surgeon, one who had more than three hundred thousand Instagram followers. I told the doctor that I was a journalist, and that I was there for a consultation. He studied my face from a few angles, felt my jaw, and suggested exactly what the first doctor had recommended. The prices were lower this time—if I had wanted to put the whole thing on my credit card, I could have.

I took the elevator down to the street with three very pretty women who all appeared to be in their early twenties. As I drove back to my hotel, I felt sad and subdued and self-conscious. I had thought that I was researching this subject at a logical distance: that I could inhabit the point of view of an ideal millennial client, someone who wanted to enhance rather than fix herself, who was ambitious and pragmatic. But I left with a very specific feeling, a kind of bottomless need that I associated with early adolescence, and which I had not experienced in a long time.

I had worn makeup at sixteen to my college interviews; I'd worn makeup at my gymnastic meets when I was ten. In the photos I have of myself at ballet recitals when I was six or seven, I'm wearing mascara and blush and lipstick, and I'm so happy. What did it mean, I wondered, that I have spent so much of my life attempting to perform well in circumstances where an unaltered female face is aberrant? How had I been changed by an era in which ordinary humans receive daily metrics that appear to quantify how our personalities and our physical selves are performing on the market? What was the logical end of this escalating back-and-forth between digital and physical improvement?

On Instagram, I checked up on the accounts of the plastic surgeons I had visited, watching comments roll in: "this is what I need! I need to come see you ASAP!", "want want want," "what is the youngest you could perform this procedure?" I looked at the Instagram account of a singer born in 1999, who had become famous as a teen-ager and had since given herself an entirely new face. I met up with a bunch of female friends for dinner in L.A. that night, two of whom had already adopted injectables as part of their cosmetic routine. They looked beautiful. The sun went down, and the hills of L.A. started to glitter. I had the sense that I was living in some inexorable future. For some days afterward, I noticed that I was avoiding looking too closely at my face.



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