Digital Realities & Virtual Ideals: Portraiture, Idealism and the Clash of Subjectivities in the Post-Digital Era

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Abstract

All portraits play host to a number of antithetical tensions, such as 'private' and 'public', 'real' and 'ideal', without which they would be reduced to a type of unassuming identification of subjects. Whereas in premodern times the artist was subject to the demands of the commissioner, after modernism the representational desires of the sitter began to clash with the creative intentions of the artist. Prior to the introduction of digital formats, this clash of subjectivities manifests itself in photography during the production of the work, the shooting of a portrait. Digital photography and post-production editing have expanded the methods for idealising external appearance; a desire stimulated by the recent technological acceleration of production and circulation of more 'manipulated' portraits than ever.

In what ways, therefore, does the introduction of digital post-production editing and composite images affect this double-clash in portraiture, between the real and ideal, and the desires of the sitter against the intentions of the artist? Moreover, how does the evolution of self-portraiture in the 'selfie' affect the epistemological character of the genre? As such, is conceptual and aesthetic subservience a matter of technological possibility or creative determination?

Idealisation in art can be defined simply as the pursuit of perfection in representation. The desire to manipulate the representation of individuals in portraiture has been in place since art's public role became apparent. Today private commissioners fund portraits for their collections in order to inflate their public reputation; politicians rely on portraits to convey their personas to the voting public; and, celebrities employ portraits to enhance their reputation. Mobile phones and social media have stimulated the production and circulation of more 'manipulated' portraits than ever. What we have, therefore, in Western portraiture is an age-old tradition of the idealisation of the representations of individuals that area destined for public circulation. With the introduction of digital photography and post-production editing this pressure for idealisation becomes heightened.

Similar to scientists and philosophers, artists often employ their practice for exploring the nature of the self. By 'real', I refer to the kind of portraiture that is driven by an investigative approach towards the representation of a subject's identity, rather than an illustrative fabrication commanded by a set of contextual impositions. Many works of such nature are not necessarily or at least initially destined for public viewing in exhibitions or other forms of publication. This leads us to another subtle distinction between the private and public contexts of production and display. Conversely, a representation destined for public perception outside of the relative creative freedom of the artworld, is ruled by an awareness of its eventual context of display from the outset. Therefore, the fabrication of a public image compromises any epistemological role of the portrait as a creative means for a critical inquiry on the nature of being. The dynamics between the 'real' and 'ideal' in portraiture are not set

in a strict binary dialectic contest. Rather, all portraits host a number of such antithetical tensions, without which they would be reduced to a type of nominal identifications of subjects. Artists are aware that every portrait might eventually become public at variable degrees, regardless of how private they would prefer them to remain; and that every portrait destined for public consumption engages with the nature of being and identity despite of variable expectations and expressed demands that limit but not completely exclude explorative tendencies. Indeed, what makes portraits interesting throughout the history of art is that they are a testament of a contested co-existence between a critical inquiry in understanding who we are (real) and an intentional appropriation of invariable aspects of our representation based on who we would like to be (ideal).

Similarly, and mostly due to its nature, photography is still caught in its founding paradox. On the one hand, photographers claim to be defenders of photography's irreducible realism and truth, yet on the other hand a desire for equal status among the older disciplines seems to be pursued under the pre-modern directives of the French Academy, in which artists are expected to alter the representation of external appearance in order to emphasise their own intellectual and creative abilities. This combination, of the persuasiveness of photographic veracity with the pressure for representational manipulation that its inherent aesthetic verisimilitude imposes, is responsible for both the traditional criticism of photography's perceived expressive limitations – due to its mere mechanical and artisanal character – and more recently why digitally manipulated photographs are deemed to be 'untrustworthy'. Caught in this theoretical *cul de sac* it seems that photographers are left with little room for developing a critical understanding of their practice as constructed at all levels.

All portraits are the result of a process of negotiation between the demands and expectations of the sitter and the creative intentions of the photographer/artist. For instance,

the sitter's self-presentation is never neutrally coded; it is always the outcome of the ways in which photographer and sitter manipulate, replicate, or ignore the prevailing representational regime and its cultural mores. In this sense, we might talk about a clash of subjectivities internal to the making of a portrait. But this clash of subjectivities is in turn determined by the conditions of production, that is, whether the photographer operates as an artist or not, and whether the portrait is commissioned or non-commissioned. In cases where the portrait is non-commissioned and under the control of an artist, it will be the artist who predominantly imposes his or her claims to creativity on this process. However, if the portrait is commissioned there is a greater likelihood that the sitter and or commissioner will retain control. Hence, the clash of subjectivities in portraiture is very much context specific. Consequently, the idealisation of the sitter is not an abstract process, but one determined by given socio-cultural conditions and therefore leads us to talk about the historical relationship of the sitter and artist/photographer in terms of various techniques of idealisation. Self-portraits have traditionally offered a liberated way for artists to explore aspects of their selves without the burden of clients' expectations and public viewing. This removal of the subjectivities of the sitter, commissioner, and viewer is what allows for self-portraits to remain a very private and indeed intimate practice, and as such ripe for aesthetic and conceptual experimentation. Recent developments of the genre ('selfie') have amplified the scope of viewers of self-portraits beyond the likes of an exhibition audience while the immediacy and the reach of the means of circulation increased the rapid transformation of the genre's once private nature into public. This is why the introduction of new artistic techniques (technological and stylistic) presents new sources and incentives for idealisation, while new mechanisms of image circulation raise our awareness of public exposure *in* and *to* images, and which in return fuel the desire for the manipulation of the real.

Before we proceed with an analysis of the effects of recent cultural and technological advancements on the development of contemporary portraiture it is worth revisiting the rich history of the genre through the prism of Jacques Rancière's (2004, 2009) model of 'regimes of the arts': the ethical, representative, and aesthetic. Rancière's non-linear approach allows us to revisit the history of portraiture without the burdens of formalism or metaphysical teleology. This is because it is a model that perceives artistic developments in relation to their historical context and social conditions, and not as isolated phenomena. As such I will revisit certain key moments in the development of portraiture in order to understand the social conditions that constitute the two poles of the clash of subjectivities; namely, the attribution of honour to the sitter and the creative independence of the artist. The fact that these notions survive to this day is why the meta-historical nature of Rancière's model is useful in establishing a methodological distinction between the origins of these concepts and their subsequent conflictual co-existence.

During classicism, or what Rancière calls the 'ethical regime', representational veracity was employed for the communication of various ideals, often personified through the portrayal of celebrated individuals. The exemplary role of art's public role brought to the fore the ethical and moral responsibility that governs cultural forms of production after Plato's famous distinction between Truth and truthfulness in *Theaetetus*; the real thing and its re-presentation. Once the attribution of these ideals becomes part of the portrait's honorific function certain rhetorical devices come into play that direct the production of meaning away from the neutrality of the document – that Plato would have been in favour of – and into the Aristotelian triadic structure that governs fiction, or the 'representational regime': the choice of concept, the means of its representation, and the conventions of its communication.

Modernism sought to radically deconstruct the creative limitations of the representational framework by prioritising expression over language. To a certain extent this was the result of the realisation that certain aspects of the world evaded conventional representation. In many ways this was creatively liberating, in so far as, art could become epistemologically productive: instead of becoming subservient to the communication of external ideas, art now was able to critically engage with the nature of language. When it came to portraiture, under the 'aesthetic regime', artists abandoned the conventions of idealisation that commissions imposed, and employed their practice in order to explore the question of being, consciousness, and the self. Unfortunately, the democratisation of the production of portraits through photography did not deliver the aesthetic autonomy that was hoped for through further creative independence. The glorified return of the honorific through the employment of the photographic image in popular media led to the copying of bourgeois patterns of representation. Mimesis, the fiction of the pose, and stylistic adoption all reaffirm Rancière's argument that the aesthetic regime carries forward the hierarchy of the forms of the previous regime. Otherwise, the drive for a philosophical approach towards individuality would have diminished the honorific of the pre-modernist aesthetic regime.

The idealisation of natural appearance did not occur until the time of Alexander the Great, and the introduction of imperialist monarchy. Vasari refers to Plutarch who elaborates on how the ancient court painters corrected physical defects while still maintaining likenesses, as far as possible. He also talks about how Alexander allowed only Apelles to paint his portraits, which stand as the first examples of politically-infused portraiture (Borsi 1977, book 2, chap. 40). Apelles clearly followed the creative directions of Aristotle, Alexander's teacher:

Since Tragedy is a representation of better people from those of our times, one should imitate good portrait painters, who, while rendering the distinctive form and achieving a likeness, yet paint people better than they are. So too the poet should ennoble the representation of people who are irascible or have other similar defects of character; just like Homer portrays Achilles as a noble, yet also as an example of brutal strength. (Aristotle 1995, 5.1454b 8-14)

Alexander built on the exemplary function of the portrait and historical painting, and he employed the visual representation of his accomplishments in order to reinforce his rule.

The portrait was fully developed into a political medium in the first century A.D., given the Romans' elaborate use of portraits in civic and imperial roles. During this era, the portrait never ceased serving as a form of a public 'document', often incorporating the physiognomic characteristics of important figures in an attempt to construct and maintain their public image. Roman rule depended on noble hereditary divine rights, which in the context of portraiture simply posed as another excuse for idealisation. As such, the emperor had to establish his accession to power by justifying his ancestral origin through the delimitation of his own individual characteristics, eradicating any hopes of an individual image. Overall, the Roman emperor's public image was caught between a desire to address specific social issues in connection with political questions and a defence of familial origin that underlined the importance of social and political precedent over likeness (West 2004). As Joanna Woodall (1997, 2) argues in the discussion of the aesthetic manipulation of external appearance: "by silently assimilating the real to the ideal...[naturalistic court portraiture]...enabled a particular human being to personify the majesty of the kingdom or the courage of a military leader." In this way, the Renaissance debate between artist and

artisan and the French (1648) and English (1768) Royal Academies' emphasis on intellectual skill encouraged practices of idealisation as a move away from naturalism. Thus, up until modernism the portrait subsumed the role of transmitting the power of each commissioner (whether ruling elite or church), which in turn required "idealisation above lifelikeness" (Gibson 2000, 9).

Commissioned portraiture has always posed a huge threat to artistic freedom, stemming from the demands of the sitter, or commissioner of the work. Writing on pre-modern portraiture Harry Berger Jr. (2000, 80) labels this form of practice "mimetic idealism," based on the fact that "it privileges both the increased naturalism or realism…and the idealisation demanded by the portrait's social and political functions". Modernism's response to this situation is reflected in the decline of commissioned portraits, and the substitutive introduction of family, friends, partners, and associates as 'new' portrait subjects: Matisse painted his wife and Derain; Derain painted Matisse; Kokoschka painted his friends, the actress Else Kupfer, the architect Adolf Loos, and the artist William Wauer; Picasso painted outsiders (from beggars to cabaret performers and prostitutes), his partners (from Madeleine to Jacqueline), his supporters (from Apollinaire to Uhde), his patrons (from Stein to Errazuriz), and his dealers (from Vollard to Rosenberg).

What debased realism and its aesthetic crisis in the 19th century was precisely its subordination to classicist forms of idealisation. Modernists perceived these forms as the main cause of creative delimitation, since they primarily served to support the interests of the patron. Yet, the honorific function of portraiture has sustained the genre's popularity, long after the achievements of modernism. At the same time, we have to take into consideration the economic pressures of modern life on artists. Many modern artists, such as Picasso after Cubism, implemented a subtle yet clear divide between commissioned portraits and those

that they exercised complete creative independence to freely explore their creative interests. By commissioning works by respected artists prominent individuals continued to employ portraiture in order to secure their inclusion within the public domain. One of the consequences of this is that this honorific process is guided by forms of idealisation that hinder the artist's control over the work since the inclusion in a given pantheon of public images presupposes the adoption of conventional realist representational standards. Berger (2000, 30) claims that the aesthetic and ideological effects of commissioned portraiture are, therefore, in no way inconsequential: "when the act of commission or donation enters into the content…when the indexical sign becomes an indexical icon of donor power, the traces of that power already emanating from every material inch of the sign are merely redistributed, not concealed".

Adopting a Lacanian view of self-presentation as constructed and composed, Berger goes on to argue that early modern portraiture is governed by a performative fiction given the sitters' habit of posing as a result of their awareness of their posing as complicit in the act of representation. Accordingly, "the portrait presents – performs, displays, stages – not a person but a representation, and the representation not of a person but of an act of self-presentation" (Berger 2000, 13). Therefore, for Berger (26), "a portrait presents itself as a sign that denotes its referent by resemblance; the referent it denotes is not simply a person but a person in the act of posing; and since posing is part of the causal event that produced it, the portrait as a sign is indexical as well as iconic." As sound as this argument might seem, it must be noted that the view of the portrait as an 'iconic index' is only applicable to certain historical eras (from Renaissance until modernism), to commissioned portraiture and to many portraits where posing is a central part of the process of self-representation. Thus, Berger's semiotic account of portraiture cannot act as an exhaustive methodological template for understanding

portraiture's development through history, since it assumes, in a highly undifferentiated way, that all portraits are idealised representations in the *same kind of way*. To accept this position, would be essentialist and dismissive of portraiture's philosophical significance.

During modernism there is a transition from a figural idealisation that addresses the sitter or client's demands, to a formal abstraction based on the creative intentions of the artist. In pre-modern artistic practices, the painter or sculptor was at the service of his or her subject, appropriating appearance through composition and pose, in order to meet the demands of the subject or patron. Richard Brilliant (1991, 11) discusses the ways by which representation in portraits is constructed according to social expectations that often suppresses "individual personal idiosyncrasies" in order to impress an audience. These demands often reflected the prevailing social and aesthetic conditions of a theatricality that privileges the role of the spectator. In modernist practices the subject finds itself subordinated to the artist's creative intentions, who often abstracts forms through a non-naturalistic model of representation that prioritises the 'interpretative' skills of the artist. Modernist portraiture emphasises the co-existence, then, of two subjectivities in portraiture, those of the 'portraying' artist and the 'portrayed' sitter. Along the same lines, Brilliant (31) claims that a portrait might reflect a conflict, a "struggle of dominance between the artist's conception and the sitter's will".

Modernism's contribution to the genre was to force us to reconsider our viewing expectations when addressing a portrait: do we, primarily look for traits of resemblance or for convincing evidence of the artist's subjectivity? This interchange leads to a vicious circle: the artist's process of expression moves towards and away from the subject in a constant unresolved conflict between the creative interests of the artist and the honorific interests of the sitter. Thus, if the honorific is to be honoured itself we cannot expect the sitter to totally surrender him or herself to the artist. Rather, we should anticipate that the subject would

attempt to retain some control over this process by projecting certain preferable elements of self or, elevating aspects of his or her appearance and character at the expense of others.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the dominant modernist mode from 1900 marks a shift from the artist's attention to a subject's 'inner being' to the celebration of expressive interiority through artistic modes of production that identifies truth with a rejection of naturalist resemblance and mechanical representation. Indeed, there is something altogether bigger at stake: the rejection of mechanised mimesis is seen as a refusal of the de-individualisation and industrial uniformity of the self, which is why the invention of photography was seen as highlighting the rationalisation in mimesis. Nevertheless, despite painting's liberation from mimesis, painters employed photography as a new tool for diminishing lengthy sittings and as a replacement for the mirror in the production of self-portraits; the expressionists Edvard Munch, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Egon Schiele are among a number of modernists who employed photography in this way in their self-portraits. But, if one of traditional portraiture's roles is to provide a representation of 'inner being' based on representational insight as against expressive technique, then photography should be equally capable of doing so given its inherent veracity. Yet, photography is invariably perceived as being unable to capture the subject's 'inner essence' given the camera's mechanical functionality, which negates the supposed "semantic" abilities of the artist's power of representation (Alphen 2005, 23). Photographers consequentially are easily led into this imported cross-disciplinary *pseudo-dilemma*. Although idealisation was encouraged in antiquity and the premodern era as a move away from mere artisanal copying, during modernism it was perceived as a subservient aesthetic move. Due to photography's limited scope for abstraction, photographers often hastily resorted to idealisation as a way of dealing with the inherent verisimilitude of mechanical reproduction. As a result, idealisation eventually forces photography into a

double subservience: in order to successfully incorporate the demands of commissioners *and* satisfy the expectations of viewers, photographic portraiture strives to adopt the medium specific frameworks of painting and sculpture.

Conversely, the dissolution of the photographic document as a factual recording of a subject/object or event opens it up to creative direction, hence the rise of 'editorial' intervention. Images that have been extensively edited lose a sense of representational verisimilitude in order to enhance the character of the authorial meaning. Prior to this post-production stage, the photographing of a subject/object or event largely involves a set of decisions regarding framing and timing; pointing the camera and choosing which moment to 'capture'. It is precisely this 'decision making' that allows for photography to adopt a critical voice and distance itself from the myths of 'decisive moments' and other types of modernist reliance on 'lucky accidents.' Otherwise photography wilfully falls into the trap that conservative guardians of the expressive arts have claimed: a medium that simply records events in a neutral and impersonal manner and in doing so prevents its operator from developing an individual voice. Like the readymade, photography emphasises the conceptual process at the crux of art production: deciding what subject, and how to re-present them are the foundations of all forms of creativity.

Digital technology has had a trifold effect on photography. Namely, it has changed the way images are recorded, edited, and distributed. The indexical link between photography and the world in analogue photography is attributed to the way that images are recorded by light affecting certain chemical changes on film. It could be argued that the same recording principle applies to digital photography, where a sensor translates light into programming code and pixels. This, however, leads to a consequential problem. According to some critics such as Geoffrey Batchen (1999, 213-215), digital photography can be altered at its foundations

through the manipulation of pixels - the equivalent of grain in analogue photography – or, even worse, digital images can emerge outside the photographic process: "digital images may have no origin other than their own computer programs…(analogue) photographs are privileged over digital images because they are indexical signs, images inscribed by the very objects to which they refer." Of course, these days newspaper and magazine editors can detect and prevent manipulation at pixel level by demanding images in RAW format.

Nevertheless, the introduction of digital cameras and post-production editing enhanced the potential for idealisation in photography. The ever-growing volume of edited or retouched images circulated in popular and social media, forces viewers to question photography's veracity - its ability to deliver objective truth. Batchen (1999, 211) argues that:

> whereas [analogue] photography still claims some sort of objectivity, digital imaging remains an overtly fictional process. As a practice known to be nothing but fabrication, digitization abandons even the rhetoric of truth that has been such an important part of photography's cultural success. As the name suggests, digital processes actually return the production of photographic images to the whim of the creative human hand (to the digits). For that reason, digital images are actually closer in spirit to art and fiction that they are to documentation and fact.

The association of haptic ability and craft skills has been in place since classicism. The perception of hands as the physical counterpart of human reason was discussed by Anaxagoras, and recorded by Aristotle. According to Aristotle, the hand is not a specialised instrument, as a claw for example, but allows for the possibility of many skills and thus paves the way for the emergence of craft. Aristotle's appraisal of the human hand, in relation to

animal parts allowed the emerging bourgeois to refer to the hands as part of an effort to promote the noble virtue of their creative choice, that is, skill. The full passage reads:

> For the intelligent person would put the most organs to use in the best possible way, and the hand is not one organ but many; for it is, as it were, an instrument for further instruments…For the hand can be a talon, a claw, a horn or even a spear, and a sword, or any other weapon or tool; it can be all those due to its ability to grasp and hold. (Aristotle 1994, book IV, 687a 18-21 & 687a 3-6)

Aristotle's understanding of the haptic-as-craft leads to types of manipulation that are intrinsically linked with idealisation, as advanced in his *Poetics*. Does this link with craft provide enough ground to perceive *all* digital images as fictional? Is there a distinction between the recording and editing stages of the photographic act and the ways in which each affect its indexical veracity? Batchen's criticism is primarily directed towards images that are generated through digital compositing, hence the emphasis on craft, rather than those which are recorded digitally and edited in ways that resemble an analogue darkroom.

The editing possibilities of post-production software have vastly expanded from mimicking the adjustments of a darkroom (exposure, contrast levels, etc.) to advance forms of photomontage. Thus, image manipulation should not be solely associated with digital processes. Photographic portraits, similarly to painted or sculpted portraits, have no less been subject to a process of idealisation. This occurs through both the shooting stage – through pose (see Berger) – and through various lens-based techniques that improve the rendering of appearance - softening of blemishes, 'facial glow', etc. Moreover, postproduction editing has been in place in analogue darkroom practices and artist studios prior to the introduction of

computer software. For example, while Soviet censors managed to remove Leon Trotsky from Party photographs, Dadaist tactics of photomontage (Raoul Haussman, Hannah Höch, John Heartfield) served as a powerful political tool for publicly opposing and resisting oppressive politics. Famously, in February 1982 a simple altering of an image from vertical to horizontal (a camel train in front of the pyramids) for the purpose of fitting the cover of National Geographic caused an outrage and questioned the magazine's commitment to documentary truth.

Recently more and more artists and amateur photographers are returning to analogue photography, putting in place a revival of film photography similar to the resurgence of printed books and vinyl records in response to digitised books and music. Contemporary film photography has initiated a reskilling of craft processes involved in the production of tangible outcomes either by full analogue means – from film roll to darkroom prints – or hybrid ways – from film roll to digital post-production of scanned negatives. This preference of format should not be exclusively perceived in response to a growing mistrust of the objective capacity of digitally recorded images but also as a return to the aesthetic qualities and craft processes of film photography. Many photographers have come to re-appreciate the technical discipline that a film camera commands due to the inability to review images instantly; and as an immediate outcome of this, the unexpected results of experimental approaches that are affected during the recording stage of a photograph. The adoption of the visual pallet of legendary film emulsions in the form of filters by popular editing and sharing applications is testament to the longing for the aesthetics of erroneous deviations from a 'perfect' rendering that has become synonymous with digital cameras. The absolute exclusion of digital compositing functions in these applications suggest a crucial distinction between a darkroom type of post-production editing and a more radical form or compositing that has its roots in

collage and photomontage. Therefore, the return of analogue photography is not solely driven by its perception as a more truthful medium but also by a set of aesthetic preferences.

Often it is quite difficult to distinguish between analogue and digital types of photomontage and collage. Photomontage is the methodological core of many contemporary critical practices that stand at the opposing end of the idealisation of the real, like those of Peter Kennard and Martha Rosler. Therefore, the question is whether the employment of digital methods affects the conceptual nature of a work and its perception. Digital post-production editing has simply made photomontage easier to produce and broaden its potential but as John Roberts (2014, 30) argues, "digitalisation does not destroy the truth-claims of photography; rather it makes such claims an explicit condition of critical reconstruction". Artists and professional photographers will develop such techniques, either through staging and posing, framing, or postproduction editing, that do not necessarily aim at flattering their subject matter. Roberts (106) goes on to explain how, for artists such as Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky, digital postproduction has "become the means by which the real is self-consciously conjoined from discrete elements, transforming naturalism's idea of the photograph as a neutral transcription of appearances into its very opposite: the figural (metaphoric) construction of the real, as in painting." Often when artists act as critical agents, free from the constraints of commercial and professional contexts, they employ the convincing qualities of verisimilitude and alter appearances in order to reveal disclosed truths; or even the act of disclosure itself that becomes apparent by idealisation.

Unaltered appearances can also be deceiving in their concealment of hidden truths. Steve Edwards (2006, 137) argues, in a post-Brechtian manner, that "mere fidelity to appearance does not necessarily help in understanding complex modern reality". There have been numerous debates on manipulated War photography (Capa's Spanish Civil War,

Wong's Japanese bombing of Shanghai, etc.) and whether the intention to reveal the effects of war justifies a deviation from factual recording. In fact, and as Edwards (85) implies, digital photography has brought to the fore the image manipulation tendencies that were always present in photography. Thus, we could argue that conservative photographers object to the expanding potential of digital editing because it lays bare the fact that, like all mediums and disciplines, photography is not, and has never been, immune to idealisation and figuralisation. The masks are off: the apparent medium of truth can no longer be regarded as inherently truthful. As such, photographic idealisation is an *oxymoron*: it draws on the truthfulness of photography to reinforce its opposite, the purposeful manipulation of the real, inherent to photography, and its claim on the real. Yet, because truth is subjective, and its representation is a matter of persuasion, idealisation eventually loses the objective base upon which its claims are proposed.

The development of mass media in the 20th century and social media in the 21st century has exponentially extended the volume of spectators of photographs and, in turn, increased the sitters' awareness of the viewing conditions of their representation. This expansion of public circulation has certainly democratised the process of dissemination, but at a high aesthetic and conceptual cost. The dynamics of this process are so intense that Cruz and Thornahm (2015, 3) have come to view lens-based self-portraits (selfies) as a "wider social, cultural, and media phenomenon…rather than an artefact [or] a representational image." Cruz and Thornahm are right to identify the 'socio-technical' dimensions of this phenomenon, but to isolate its understanding from the history and traditions of photographic practice would be to disregard its significance in relation to the fictive and idealising logic of photography. Thus, the 'selfie' is not just a means of alternative communication or self-

representation; it is part of a long and endless transformation of the codes and genres of portraiture.

The mechanics of circulation, namely the volume and the immediacy of accessibility have undoubtedly increased the desire for fabricated forms of self-representation. The longing for social inclusion often burdens subjects with narcissistic attention-seeking and approval - the search for 'followers' and 'likes' - as they wilfully transform "privacy into a mimicry of celebrity culture". (Giroux 2015, 163) As a result, such idealised forms of portraiture are based on popular definitions of perfection that diminish notions of individuality. The adoption of pose and the definition of individuality through a universality of pictorial norms that disguise the uniqueness of the self is an act of performance that confirms the power of the viewer over the viewed. In line with Berger's notion of 'a representation of the act of representation' the 'selfie' becomes a performance of performativity.

For Julian Stallabrass (2014, 20) 'selfies' affect the documentary character of photography as they "pollute awareness of the real world and suppress memory of anything other than the moment when the image is captured." Stallabrass is referring to photographs produced by ordinary people who wish to document chance meetings with famous people. Of course, the drive to share this with the rest of the world is fuelled by a fantasy of social achievement, in the form of fame-by-association. The vast array of facial expressions and poses that are becoming popular through self-portraits executed with phone cameras signify the dissolution of individuality into a pantheon of popular poses. In other words, the adoption of a pose that was initiated by a popular persona provides the illusion of acceptance in a broader celebrity culture. There are echoes of these strategies of claim-to-fame in the Roman erosion of facial characteristics in order to promote familial claims to rule. Thus, although the 'selfie' might dissolve the clash of subjectivities (in a self-portrait the author and sitter are one)

it is in danger of diminishing the creative tension of the author-and-sitter through a wholly idealised appropriation of adopted aesthetic norms. Moreover, the 'selfie' pose in front of a mirror revives pre-modern tactics of theatricality by avoiding a visual confrontation with the viewer (subject looking at us). Paradoxically, the subject is looking away from the viewer only to look at the mobile phone, the very device that circulates the image to as many possible viewers as possible.

The production of meaning in 'selfies' is not just a matter of directed intentionality (clash of subjectivities) but also of perception (viewer). With the adoption of popular poses mimesis becomes the representational veil behind which the question of identity is avoided through the collapse of the Barthean structure of *studium* and *punctum*. What immediately strikes the viewer as familiar is the manic duplication of the poses that dominate the self-portraits of celebrities. The adoption of popular representational trends expressed through acts of copying of poses or facial expressions can be easily interpreted as stylistic obedience, but what it hides is a deeper insecurity about isolation. This phenomenon of saturated posing trends puts in place a distinction between belonging – a mimetic similarity that erases individuality - and becoming - intimate self-portraits that sustain the genre's dedication to the exploration of the self. In fact, the stylistic homogeneity of posing elevates the importance and, by extension, the critical value of non-mimetic forms of self-portraiture.

Idealisation is not the only means by which appearances can be manipulated. However, its association with aestheticisation prevents it from becoming a critical method for artists whose aim is to reveal hidden realities and expose imperfections. Portraits destined for public consumption are bound by their subservience to the power of the spectator. Berger's views on the conceptual significance of the pose underline the strategies of theatricality that regulate this type of portraiture and which are now amplified by the expanded mechanisms

of distribution. This logic of dissemination, combined with the return of theatricality, transforms the structure of subjectivities in portraiture. The acknowledgement of the spectator through the manipulation of appearance and the use of the theatrical creates an active seeking of approval through the adoption of familiar representational modes. Whereas portraits of others are driven by a clash of subjectivities between author and sitter, in 'selfies' the author and sitter become 'one' in which the subjectivity of the sitter is suppressed by the role of the spectator. Ironically, this reconfigures the process of production of meaning in post-production photography. If we can no longer accept photographic veracity as a guarantee for truth, we are then compelled to think about, and question, the validity of appearances. This, in fact, might be another reason why we find manipulated images upsetting: while photographic images are easy to read, they are difficult to understand.

Viewed under Rancière's scope, the ethical, representative, and aesthetic regimes collide in the post-digital era in retrogressive ways that sustain the ideological legacies of pre-modernism through a series of post-modern revisions. The ethics of the 'selfie' reverse the exemplary character of classicist portraiture from a portrayal of ideals into concerted representational efforts to adopt the style of dominant practices. In other words, the classical moral didacticism of *how to be* is replaced by visual proof of *striving to become* someone else. The stylistic subservience that signifies this transversal is driven by the vicissitudes of alienation that expand beyond the urban challenges of the modern metropolis and onto the pressures of virtual models of being (profiles, avatars, etc.). The methodological nature of the 'selfie' is in favour of representational adherence, imposing stylistic commands that reconfigure the ethical determinacy of self-representation. As such, the classicist exemplary tone is substituted by a narcissistic cry for acceptance captured in the wilful adoption of the representational norms of cultural hegemonic aesthetics. An act that forgoes an experimental

approach towards the representational conventions of portraits, their language, and pacifies art's cognitive capacity for understanding the everchanging nature of human being.

Popular portraiture has gone through a full retrogressive circle that resembles the conditions of production that determined pre-modernist practices, completely ignoring altogether the benefits of modernist creative independence and meta-modern abolition of the need to be associated with an artistic movement. The problem with idealisation, therefore, is not located in its requisite for manipulation but, in fact, in its prioritisation of the spectator; limiting the creative independence and critical competence of the artist and the self-regulating definition of the sitter's identity in self-portraits and portraits of others. This puts in place a form of aesthiticisation that is driven by the desubjectivising powers of popular personas through their corresponding mimetic acts: poses and retouches based on representational trends that are designed to attract maximum popular approval. Hence, we are back to what Berger calls 'iconic indexes', forms of representation that incorporate their standards from the mores of dominant ideological frameworks. This longing for popular approval diffuses independent productions of culture and prevents portraiture from fulfilling its philosophical function and epistemological role in exploring the nature of being. Instead of searching for questions, idealised portraits deliver crude answers. Instead of initiating and accommodating a dialogue between subject, artist and audience, they defer to public appeal and self-promotion.

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