SELFIE CULTURE: A VIEW ON CYBER DOCUMENTARISM

LEJLA PANJETA [*]

Abstract

The intention of this discussion is to question of documentary form and selfie phenomenon in the cultural implications emerged as a consequence of widespread new technologies and social networking, touchscreen and video. What is the feature of documentary film form in the culture of selfism and technology friendly recording devices? Culture as the inherent feature of a group and individual both is defined by a given space and time and is in constant changing mode. In new media defined by the Wi- Fi technology and communication gadgets the new conducts and behaviors are introduced into the traditional cultures. Taking the fast lane of connectivity but in the same time remaining in the slow lane of anonymity is not just a fad of anonymous networking of international culture, but the main communicating feature today. Recording video and taking pictures have lost their importance and elitism, gaining superficiality and HD quality. What happens to the content, cultural context and creative approaches in this process?

What is the quality of new international culture in the virtual space and time defined by picture in motion language of visual communication (film grammar) and technology video devices? Does the culture based on this technology make the new stereotypes? What is the human language for communication in this international culture? Can English be the long lost Babylon dream fulfilled? Is documentarism benefiting from today's culture – or is it dying?

Keywords: Documentarism, immediacy, culture, selfism, communication, virtuality.

Introduction

The work before you is not a classical research. It does not derive from theory, but rather everyday practice and common sense of critical evaluation of the theoreticians' referenced.[1] This opinion piece derives from the old fashioned skepticism and literary essay inherent criticism. Questions are asked, but not asserted or concluded. The reason is the subject of this small investigation. The self and new selfism culture. Thus the "self-opinionated essay".

Selfitis and the Self

The self is the object of phenomenology in various studies such as philosophy, psychology, cultural and media studies, theology, as well as new fields of research based on the merge of technology and empiric philosophy like technoself studies. In short, it is to be considered here as the phenomenon of one's experience in perception, emotions, thoughts, believes and reflections. The self consists of the literal belief in one's self. This self is determined by one's culture, society, media that surrounds it. The self is very much dependent on the influences of what and where it is being situated. It looks out for its surroundings in the real world in order to prevent threat as much as possible. This is how identity is formed.

"The discursive constitution of identity, subjectivity, and old and new media technologies is thoroughly tangled. As we have noted, 'identity' and 'subjectivity' are rarely defined, are used differently in different discourses, and are often apparently interchangeable. Also, the term 'real world' should be read with caution. Virtual environments and media are no less real for being virtual – they exist as both data and lived experience."[2]

Many have argued that media influences society and individuals shaping the emotions, stands and beliefs. Self can be manifested as a reflection of this influence. The New Media (discussed thoroughly latter) that consists of audio-visual tools for sharing and social gathering creating this virtual realities is the new environment in which the self is reinvented and redefined. The self is created if not modified according to the cultural norms of the social media and "changes in media technologies are correlated with social change. If the logic of old media corresponded to the logic industrial mass society, the logic of new media fits the logic of the post industrial society, which values individuality over conformity."[3]

Social networking or private and public video channels are places for self-fulfillment and expression. "The desire to express one's self through (artistic) media is a hallmark of romanticism and long predates the development of digital media."[4] Therefore the desire is nothing new. The phenomenon is not new. But the combination of new technologies and new media tools is new in terms of determining the self in everyday life and culture. "This is not to say that our identity is fully determined by media, but rather that we employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity. As these media become simultaneously technical analogs and social expressions of our identity, we become simultaneously both the subject and object of contemporary media."[5] Note the funny illustration on how the technology of the new media changes our cultural norms.
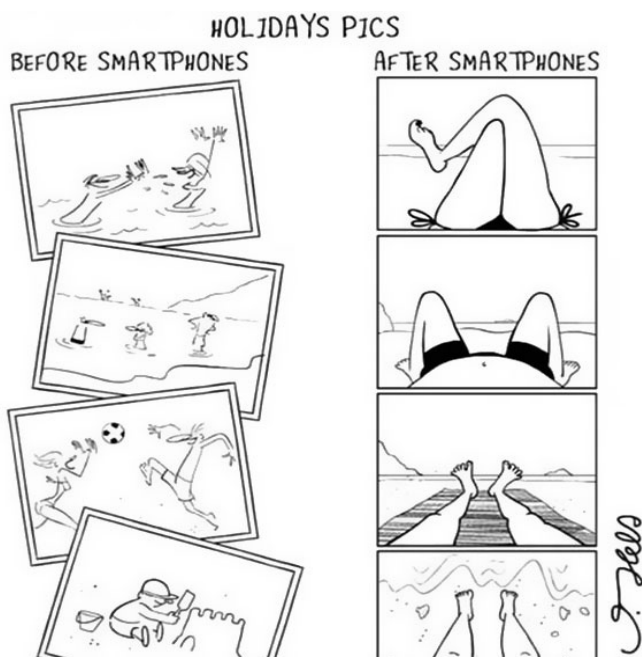

Illustration 1.

According to the unbelievably up-to-date creative writing site *The Adobo Chronicles*[6], in 2014 the Oxford Dictionary incorporated the new definition of the notion "selfitis". This phenomenon is described as making (taking pictures or recording videos) self-portraits, uploading and sharing them on the internet (social

---

[2] Martin Lister et al., *New Media: A Critical Introduction.* First published 2003. 2nd ed. London, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 270.

[3] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Leonardo Books, series editor: Roger F. Malina, Cambridge MA & London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2001, p. 41.

[4] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge MA & London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2000, p. 234.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 231.

[6] Anonymous, *'Selfitis', 'Cyberespionage', 'Protoplanet' newest words in Oxford dictionaries*, April 18, 2014. Retrieved from: http://adobochronicles.com/2014/04/18/selfitis-cyberespionage-protoplanet-newest-words-in-oxford-dictionaries/.

media, personal profiles, social networking, etc.). The same site published the news that the American Psychiatric Association (APA) during the same year has confirmed that taking "selfies" is a mental disorder. This exhibitionistic disorder is called selfitis, and is defined as the obsessive compulsive desire of person to take photos of one's self and post them on social media. In the same definition of the disorder selfitis is described as a "way to make up for the lack of self-esteem and to fill a gap in intimacy."[7] There are three levels of the disorder: Borderline selfitis (taking photos of one's self at least three times daily but not posting them on social media), Acute selfitis (taking photos of one's self at least three times a day and posting them on social media), and Chronic selfitis (uncontrollable urge to make photos and post them on social media more than six times a day). "According to the APA, while there is currently no cure for the disorder, temporary treatment is available through Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)."[8]

The internet media responded by harshly denouncing the lie that APA had declared such a disease.[9] The dispute and debate on the internet on this matter instigated the specialists to consider the phenomena of auto photo (selfie in Spanish), but all the while APA has not officially responded on the issue. Exponential growth of the diseases declared by APA in the recent years might as well allow one more official disorder. Narcissism is already a character trait, with added technology; why not make it a disease. The internet community already has, although in the same manner as Orson Wells made hysteric paranoia with the radio-drama *The War of the Worlds*. One more proof of reliability of the internet surfing.

Narcissism, voyeurism and exhibitionism are treated as individual problems, less than social deviation and media consequences. Due to official recognition of selfitis as the phenomenon and psychiatric disorder, social pathology will expand the classifications of their disorder methodologies. New times call for new measures. The technology and cyber-virtuality are gaining control over our culture, making the new culture of well informed, but alienated individuals. Note the following illustration.

Illustration 2.

Virtual social gathering detach us from reality. The more we advance in technology the further we are from reality. Why do we like more to photoshop, upload and share instead of just *be* in the moment we are witnessing the truth and reality that surrounds the self we believe to be?

---

[7] Anonymous, *American psychiatric association makes it official: 'selfie' a mental disorder*, March 31, 2014. Retrieved from: http://adobochronicles.com/2014/03/31/american-psychiatric-association-makes-it-official-selfie-a-mental-disorder/comment-page-1/.

[8] *Ibidem*.

[9] Anonymous, *No, the American Psychiatric Association did not declare selfie a mental disorder*, 7 Apr. 2014. Retrieved from: http://tech.firstpost.com/news-analysis/really-american-psychiatric-association-declare-selfie-disorder-221228.html.

This is the visual stereotype of the new culture of selfism in the globalized technological cyber virtual world of the international culture:

Bottle of water,
Crouches back,
Typing on touch screen.

Sharing, liking, tweeting, surfing, uploading, etc. These are the characteristics of the new selfie culture that selfism blooms from. These are imperatives of the culture of selfism, but also inevitable consequences of the technological advancement, fair share and approach to communication of all the participants in digital new media era of human communication. WiFi has become the center around which a new culture is formed. Our world is dependent on technology for satisfying the need for socializing. At the same time alienated in reality. Note the following illustration.

Illustration 3.

Our new selfie culture is predetermined by the technology of touch screen and internet, through which all the world is at our feet (or rather under our fingertips), but in the same time nothing is palpable not even within our grasp really. We are chasing the real time in the frozen square of the led virtual screens, redefining the self by one click. This virtual world is made on the principles of the moving image spiced with audio, interactivity and English language. Does verisimilitude of the moving image in the selfie culture emerges from the documentarist quest for accuracy in transplanting the reality onto the screen? Before the LED or touch screen there was the silver screen.

Immediacy and the Documentary Truth

Ever since the prehistory of the film, influences of the celluloid narrative on its audience are registered and this new medium, at first considered nothing more than an entertainment tool, showed that the slights of hand can have considerable convincing power. At the end of 19th century and birth of cinema, people who saw one of the first Lumière movies (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, 1896) jumped out of their seats believing that the train will enter the screening room when approaching in the close up shot to the camera. Broadcasting of the H.G. Well's interpretation of *The War of the Worlds* in 1938 by Orson Wells, making the audience believe that actual aliens are invading earth, caused mass hysteria in USA.

Documentation of the train arrival at the Ciotat station by Lumière brothers is copy-pasting the real life. On the other hand, Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* from 1902 makes its own reality. This discrepancy between fantasy and realism is evident at the beginning of film, but also accurate and applicable today within the complex genre system of film storytelling. Nevertheless the realism or mimetic quality of moving images is its inherent and main feature. The phenomenological origin of television as mass media is based on the principles of film and its "documentarity". As predicted by McLuhan in the 60s the next medium that will emerge might represent the extension of our conscious mind and would surely include television as one of its contents creating the artistic forms in it. Besides the realism that is the desire to copy-paste the reality truthfully (that is also a subject to debate whether the film and TV as media can really achieve this mission), another important feature of the media and documentarism inherent to selfie culture is the claim for immediacy.

The thing under our fingertips on the screen to the world must be LIVE and NOW! The selfies taken have the quality defined by how many seconds they are younger than the last ones posted. WiFi enables these requirements.

"In digital media today as in modern art in the first half of the century, the medium must pretend to be utterly new in order to promote its claim of immediacy. It must constitute itself as a medium that (finally) provides the unmediated experience that all previous media sought, but failed to achieve. This is why each innovation on the World Wide Web must be represented by its promoters as a revolution. Streaming audio, streaming video, Java, VRML – each of these cannot merely improve what the Web offered before but must 'reinvent' the Web."[10]

Media Studies created a term for media that evolved to include human and digital technologies, personalized computers, multimedia contents and forms, interactivity, Internet and real time (Live) participation in the processes of communication. With these tools New Media provided democratization and active participation, making the creators also be at the receiving end of communication (consumers), and vice versa. Most theoreticians of New Media such as Shapiro suggest that the control of information will be radically changed in favor of participants making communication open to everyone. Everyone is included and our culture and lifestyle radically changes.

Illustration 4.

"If web home pages were sites of self-presentation or identity construction through the bricolage of interests, images and links, then personal blogs and social network profiles could be seen to add an ongoing identity *performance* both individually and collectively, driven by Web 2.0 technologies or multimedia, content management, network building and persistent communication."[11] The work of Alexander R. Galloway

---

[10] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *op. cit.*, p. 270.
[11] Martin Lister et al., *op. cit.*, p. 268–269.

unveils the myth about the free and open New Media by analyzing the engineering behind the network protocols.[12] It offers evidence on how the online media is more controlling than classical media and how it is even designed for surveillance. The postmodern "logic of selection"[13] explains that users (media participants) have "Photoshop power" previously reserved only for producers of entertainment, art and visual media. The same Photoshop shaping of reality is used by those in control of new media, according to their logic of selection of information which is based on cultural and political background, which is nowadays shaped by visual or multimedia content presented in New Media, corporate-owned TV and online media.
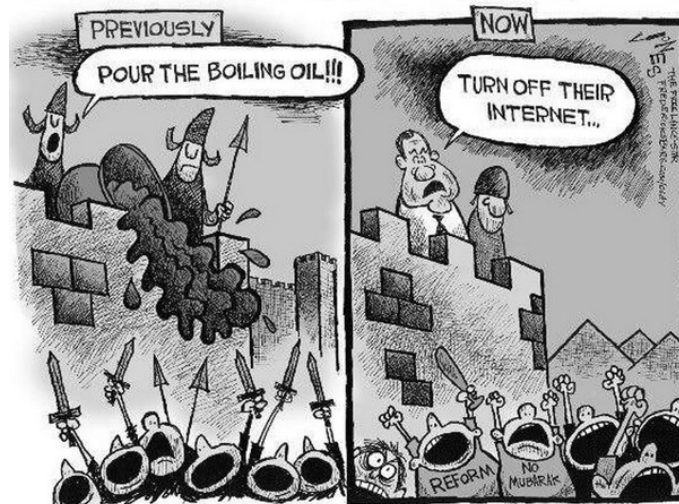

Illustration 5.

We are actively participating in the social media, but have little control over the shaping of the context of the posted self-content. Who knows if it's real even of its streamed live? Immediacy does not guarantee the reality. Authenticity is closely linked to the question of truth in virtual reality. As is the documentary film viewed as artistic expression.

"In the twentieth century, cinema played two roles at once. As a media technology, its role was capture and store visible reality. The difficulty of modifying images at once recorded precisely what lent it value as a document, assuring its authenticity. The same rigidity has defined the limits of cinema as a "super-genre" of *live-action* narrative. Although cinema includes within itself a variety of styles – the results of the efforts of numerous directors, designers, and cinematographers – these styles share a strong family resemblance. They are all children of a recording process that uses lenses, regular sampling of time, and photographic media. They are all children of a machine vision."[14]

Filmmaker and theorist Hito Steyerl draws on Michel Foucault and Siegfried Krakauer for the "politics of truth" as "production of truth, distinguishing true statements from false ones, and fixing procedures of the production of truth. Truth is thus always also politically regulated."[15] She further explains the difference between truth "in-itself" and "being-for-self" as dialectically suspended, finishing with the familiar joke from Marx Brothers film Duck Soup: "Who are you going to believe – me or your own eyes?" Power is thus always above the truth. The so called "redemptions" of reality are possible in Krakauer's and Godard's views, according to Steyerl, but only within technological possibilities of the new media (cinema taken as moving pictures with sound at the period). "The moving-image culture is being redefined once again; cinematic realism is being displaced from the dominant model to merely one option among many."[16] It is no longer elitist or even an interesting curiosity. Everyone has a camera. Everyone wants better resolution. HD has become the imperative. Thus the truth is all around us. Did the quality of the content on the screen really improve with its resolution? Or it's the quantity that makes the addicts on cyber and TV culture?

---

[12] Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How control exists after decentralization*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.
[13] Lev Manovich, *op. cit*., p. 41.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 307.
[15] Hito Steyerl, *Documentarism as Politics of Truth*, 2003. Retrieved from: http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/en.
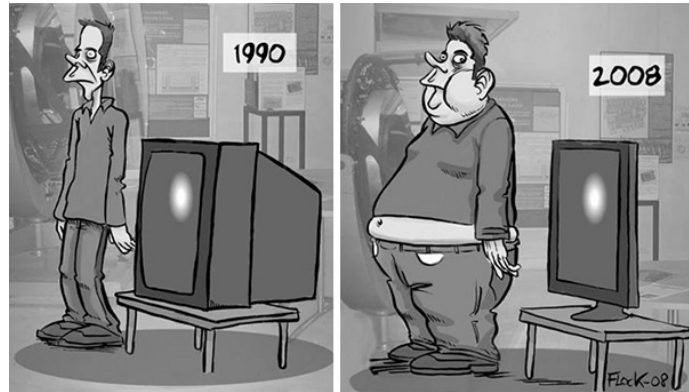[16] Lev Manovich, *op. cit*., p. 307.

Illustration 6.

In 2014 NGC pilots a documentary series *Science of Stupid* that consists of the host's comments and the selfie video of the human stupidity and crashes. Serious ones. Life endangering ones. Where does this leave the feature of the production of the documentary film if the producers' only job is to collect selfies on the spot images and videos? Are they real? Real enough. Are they authentic? Of course. The wrong light, blurs, unprofessional camera work. They are documents of the reality. Do we believe them? Yes.

"The answer lies in their lack of focus, their uncertainty. This lack of focus does not only give the images the desired feel of authenticity; it is also very revealing, if one looks more closely. Because by now this type of image has become ubiquitous. We are surrounded by rough-cut and increasingly abstract 'documentary' images, shaky, dark, or out-of-focus, images that show little else than their own excitement. The more immediate they become, the less there is to see. They evoke a situation of permanent exception and constant crisis, a state of heightened tension and vigilance. The closer to reality we get, the less focused and jumpier the image becomes. Let us call this the uncertainty principle of modern documentarism."[17]

So, modern documentarism is the main characteristic of selfism on social networks. The realism in film (documentary and feature alike) thrives to present the world as the real one, in which all the narrative elements (plot, situation, characters, conflicts, locations, etc.) stand on their own within the organized structure of the story conducted by that own world's rules. Realism as a self-effacing form of storytelling draws on the general tendency in much art to hide the process of its own making in favor of the impression that the world it represents exists on its own, autonomously. Even latter stylistic features in film, such as modernism and postmodernism, are relating to one simple quality of film: it has to be real to be convincing. But, "documentary images are so powerful because there is no more unbroken belief in their truth."[18] For Dziga Vertov, father of creative documentarism, the camera and editing are equal in the process of filmmaking and by the reformulation of reality; a new, more perfect reality is born, seen through the cinematic, as well as human lenses of the creator of the film. His famous statement: "Life caught unawares" refers to the ability of film to be perfect as opposed to the imperfections of human eyesight. "The mutability of digital data impairs the value of cinema recordings as documents of reality. In retrospect, we can see that twentieth-century cinema's regime visual realism, the results of automatically recording visual reality, was only an exception, an isolated accident in the history of visual representation, which has always involved, and now again involves, the manual construction of images. Cinema becomes a particular branch of painting – painting in time. No longer a kino-eye, but a kino-brush."[19]

This cinema-eye perfection enables the creator to reinvent the perfect reality (or a new one) according to his own ideas and the messages that he wants the audience to be focused on. Therefore the quest for the truth in documentarism failed. Did it also happen to selfie culture images on our social media?

"To use a metaphor from computer culture, new media transforms all culture and cultural theory into an 'open source.' This opening up cultural techniques, conversations, forms and concepts is ultimately the most promising cultural effect of computerization – an opportunity to see the world and the human being anew, in ways that were not available to 'a man with a movie camera'."[20]

---

[17] Hito Steyerl, "The Uncertainty of Documentarism", *Chto Delat?*, special issue: *Make Film Politically*, September 2007, available at: https://chtodelat.org/category/b8-newspapers/12-55/.

[18] *Ibidem.*

[19] Lev Manovich, *op. cit.*, p. 307–308.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 333.

In *Utopia of a Tired Man* Borges offers the philosophical review of our media reality and the humans in the future within the context of journalistic sensation and advertising industry. The consequence of this journalism is the loss of basic norms of truth and instead there is a victory and celebration of what is only peripheral and persuasive (as viewed from only one lens of the truth and reality). Selfie culture is the exact epitome of this prediction. If we put truth, reality, power of persuasion and immediacy aside, are selfies (even if used in documentary series) important? Do they contribute to the world and film/TV history? Are they worthy of our attention? Is selfie culture rigging our attention to superficiality and paraphernalia?

Culture of Selfism

We like, tweet, post, share, upload, download believing that the self has reached the fulfillment through our internet connection to the world. The connections to social networks define our virtual self. Human self turns to mechanical self. We surf, but do not dive. Massive floods of data and information, half-truths are always at our fingertips, making us lazy for action or deep thinking. The cyber world is taking over our human capacities for real life debate and culture. Note the funny illustration.
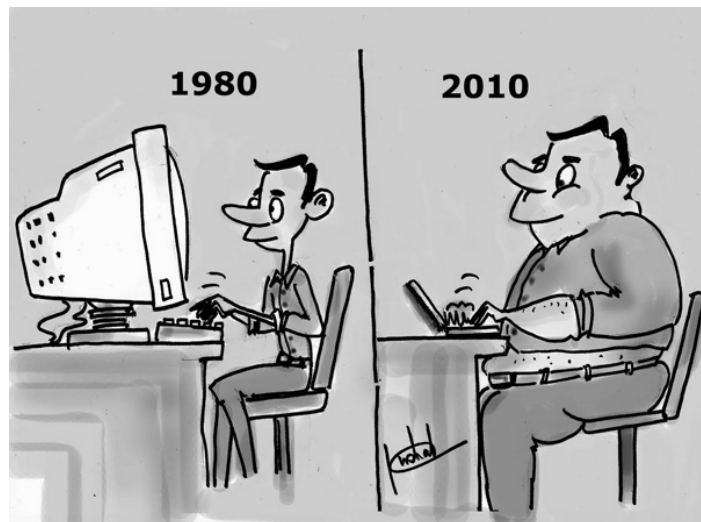

Illustration 7.

"The media has a central role; to provide the forum for the debate, much of the content and evidence, and the two-way channels through which informed decisions can be made… Beyond its role in encouraging consumption in general, media is a hungry machine that demands enormous inputs of energy and commodities for its daily survival... As our ancient ancestors understood, technological advance and media remain our most potent tools in the challenge to reverse what should be our most pressing concerns."[21]

This is the prevailing question in Media Studies: Does it really provide debates of the freedom to choose what has previously been chosen? Phenomenon of liking is interfering with our human capacity to think and judge. We choose what has already been laid out in front of us. The self is also being changed according to what is offered for us to like, tweet and share. Soon we will only memorize the passwords and profile logins. As we belong to the selfie culture like consumers with credit cards that consume in order to fulfill the self, and not share with others. Look at the funny illustration of this argument.

Sharing as caring for others becomes illegal. Then still, what better way there is to partake in this growing culture but to share selfies! According to sometimes ironical definitions of Urbandictionary.com: "Selfists do not believe in a god, but believe that each person is their own god. Selfism practices toleration of others. This is because if each person believes in themselves, people should celebrate their beliefs because it is a part of them. And they are a god (BUT they are not your god.)"[22]

---

[21] Glen Creeber and Roystonm Martin (eds.), *Digital Cultures: Understanding New Media*, Berkshire, New York: Open University Press, McGraw-Hill, 2009, p. 163.

[22] Kathy Gee, "Selfizm", posted on 18 June 2011, *Urban Dictionary*. Retrieved from: http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Selfism.

Illustration 8.

Rushing to be connected and chasing little connection bars is not just social fashion, but necessity for survival and belonging to new culture based on the WiFi technology and audio-visual language. The self needs an environment to determine and fulfill itself.

And we get the feeling of fulfillment. Documentarism adds to this feeling. Images "are all about an admixture of panic and excitement that comes from the feeling of being there (...) documentary forms create false intimacy and even false presence. They familiarize us with the world but give us no possibility for taking part in it."[23] Authenticity of the documentarism in selfie culture on social networks gives the false feeling of security and group structuring. Anonymous "on-the-go" individuals are participants in the interactive cyber communication. But, who controls the "clouds"? And how do we understand each other in this culture based on documentarism of "mechanic vision" technology platform?

Selfie Culture and Communication

"From clocks to telegraphs to radio and television, new media have always woven themselves into everyday life, interfering with existing patterns of spatiotemporal organization, generating new rhythms and spaces. The migration of computer technology from industry and research laboratory to the home over the past thirty years or so has intensified these processes."[24] Visual language or cinematic language of new media platform for selfie culture is pictographic. Reachable and understandable, it fulfills the basic communication needs. But for anything deeper, the human language is inevitable. And the universal language of new media technologies is English.

One of the most important elements for identification of the culture is the language. Which language speaks the owner of the sky where the clouds are set? Universal language of moving image or documentarism in photography is the ultimate communication tool. Therefore the pictography and universally popular glyphing is prevailing in selfie culture, breeding illiteracy and ignorance. Note the funny illustration on mail communication.

This is our new culture based on the technology of the cinematic phenomenon and the cyber reality of new media.

"All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, atheistic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, un affected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is

---

[23] Hito Steyerl, "The Uncertainty of Documentarism" (see *supra*, note 17).
[24] Martin Lister et al., *op. cit.*, p. 237.

impossible without knowledge of the way media work as environments. All media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical."[25]

Illustration 9.

This is evident in the English and pictographic language of new media. Its purpose is to establish communication codes for understanding. That way media is the message as well and psychic extension of self (adding the physical dimension to it – the camera). Basic characteristics of our new communication are: cinematic vision, pictography and English language (the Sky Lord). Is new selfie culture trying to make new Babylon tower? New universal language and culture where self is the god himself? Invasion of new technologies changed our everyday life, and our communication codes respectively.

"The intense excitement generated by new media forms such as the World Wide Web and Virtual Reality in the late 1980s and early 1990s has waned as such media have become a part of commonly experienced media world. However, the notion of 'cyberspace' as a separate, emancipatory (or more often, threatening) realm within, yet distinct from, everyday media culture persists. Journalists routinely affirm the apartness of Internet media such as chat rooms and social networking sites articles on the ominous implications for children and young people."[26]

The feature of documentarism of this new cyber culture is persuasive by nature. It is filled with stereotypes and ideologies as much as any other human communication. Simplification of pictography makes it even more political incorrect. "Form, ideology, and politicizing effects enjoy a shifting, unstable relationship that is best understood when located in relation to a given historical moment and particular audience."[27] Selfie culture is generating its own ideologies that spin around the tribal stereotypes of self-expression.

Coming back to the question of reality and mimetic quality of the truth represented (even if stereotyped) in documentary film, this certainty stands: feature of documentarism (whether it is documentary, TV or social networking selfitis) does not present, but represent the world around us. Steyerl raises this question with the answer: "Maybe. One can, however, be certain that it presents its own context by expressing it."[28] Therefore selfie documentarism expresses and stands for the accuracy backed up by selfie culture.

---

[25] Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, New York: Random House, 1967, p. 26.
[26] Martin Lister et al., *op. cit.*, p. 241.
[27] Bill Nichols, *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies*, New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2010, p. 324.
[28] Hito Steyerl, "The Uncertainty of Documentarism" (see *supra*, note 17.)

Concluding with Question Marks

Is this new selfie culture based on mechanical vision and documentarism of cinema language of moving pictures and pictography going to swallow other smaller cultures and finish the Babylon Tower? Are anonymous people connected to it only tools for decision creators or sky owners? Is selfism, as a disease and cultural phenomenon, the glue that fixes and pushes forward the development of new technologies and consequently inventing new media? If this new documentarism based selfie culture might generate the new diagnosis, does it stand on the unhealthy ground of cyber world? With every share, upload, or selfie are we further from the definition of self as human? Is the self reinvented in this new culture? Does it have the fertile soil to grow as a culture or is it destroying the very essence of reality and humanity? Is the expressive force of documentarism in selfie culture redefining the culture and new media social networking, alongside with the classical documentary film? Or is the documentary genre (the documentary form of expression and reality within) close to extinction? Is the Self reinvented or obliterated in the cyber reality of selfie culture?