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Technologies of the Self

"Who am I?" and "Who are we now?" are age-old questions that have gained momentum in the digital age, where the selfie has become one of the most common tools to respond to these questions. On average, 93 million selfies are taken every day.[1] Selfies are a way to confirm self-identity and our own selfies are fun, usually taken with some self-irony.[2] Selfies can be considered as a contemporary form of technologies of the self, a term that was proposed by Michel Foucault to indicate how individuals can shape and govern their own lives. In his earlier work, Foucault demonstrated how individuals have always been dominated by "technologies of power" that objectify the subject to institutional rules and normative behavior in changing historical contexts of medical care, education and law, order and the prison system.[3] In the early 1980s, Foucault shifted his focus to the capacities of the subject to constitute and transform itself. In his last and unfinished work, he centered on what he

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1   See https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/miscellaneous/global-addiction-selfie-facts-and-moments-from-around-the-world/click-click-click/slideshow/69810065.cms; https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-3619679/What-vain-bunch-really-24-billion-selfies-uploaded-Google-year.html; and https://www.hqpress.org/blog-2/2018/11/20/the-selfie-generation, accessed September 23, 2019.

2   Gita Laksmini Soerjoatmodjo, "I Selfie Therefore I Exist: A Preliminary Qualitative Research on Selfie as Part of Identity Formation in Adolescents," *Humanoria* 7, no. 2 (April 2016): 139–48; Fessler Leah, "Know Thyself: Scientists have Figured Out Why Your Selfies Are Funny and Authentic but Everyone Else's Are so Narcissistic," *Quartz*, February 17, 2017.

3   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977); Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Madness in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Tavistock, 1967).

called "technologies of the self," the specific techniques that human beings use which permit individuals "to effect by their own means … a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[4]

While Foucault had a historical approach and returned to the Greek classics and Christianity to find moments of change in the concepts of the ancient wisdoms "know thyself" and "care for the self," it was already clear in Foucault's own work that this notion of "the self by the self" was gaining new push in late capitalist neoliberal contexts. In *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault defined the man of neoliberalism as an "entrepreneur for himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his success and his earnings … who produces his own satisfaction."[5]

Taking Foucault's observations on technologies of the self as a starting point—and pairing them to recent findings in cognitive neuroscience and critical feminist perspectives—in this chapter I investigate how the self is constituted in a contemporary setting of neoliberal digital media culture. Inspired by Esther Gould's documentary *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* (2015) and other contemporary media examples, I ask: What are the particular technologies of the self that the digital entrepreneur has at their disposal? What kind of operations on body and soul, what kinds of satisfaction is afforded by digital technologies of the self? What consequences does the selfie-induced conception of perfection carry for the tolerance for imperfection, especially when we consider this from a feminist point of view?

And might a (digital) aesthetic of imperfection form a productive counterweight to the rampant narcissism unleashed through selfie culture? Rather than saying that the selfie is good or bad in itself, I will investigate the possibilities and limits of sustainable self-perception within the conditions of contemporary digital life and propose to see the selfie as *pharmakon*, a poison as well as possible cure for new senses of self that juggle between demands and dreams of perfection and realities of imperfection.

[4] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Huck Gutman, Patrick Hutton, Luther Martin (London: Tavistock, 1988), 18.
[5] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2008), 226.

Necessary Primary Narcissism

The sense of self has been investigated by storytellers, philosophers, scientists, and artists for many centuries, and there are no conclusive answers to the mysteries of "knowing thyself." The classic way of appropriating one's own body image is the visual self-reflection in a mirror-like surface. As the myth of Narcissus already pointed out, this self-reflection does not automatically give us the security of a stable self. On the contrary, Narcissus did not recognize his own image, and misrecognition and alienation seem to be part of the strange process of matching our reflected self-image to our inner self. In the late nineteenth century narcissism was introduced in relation to human psychology. In his essay "On Narcissism" Sigmund Freud distinguishes two forms of narcissism.[6] First there is the "normal" form, primary narcissism, the infant's initial focus on itself, which serves as a sort of defense mechanism to protect the self in its gradual separation from the mother and to develop a minimal or core self; in psychoanalysis it is generally understood that some basic form of self-love is a necessary condition to establish healthy relations to one's self and to others. The other form, secondary narcissism, is an exaggerated form of this basic and necessary self-love, pathological narcissism that produces unrealistic self-magnification, megalomania, and an exaggerated focus on the self at the dispense of (relations to) others.

In "The Mirror Stage" Jacques Lacan extended Freud's concept of primary narcissism and connected basic self-recognition to a visual mediation: the moment where the infant recognizes itself for the first time in the mirror as an image of an Ideal-I, a more perfect version of its own still incomplete self-experience.[7] This entails that for Lacan the I is always formed in relation to an object (the self in the mirror, or another person that can function as Ideal-Ego). Again this is considered a normal part of development into a healthy human being where the initial misrecognition of the self-as-other also invites relations to the other.

Filmmaker Victor Kossakovsky has movingly demonstrated the power of the mirror stage and self-perception in his short film *Svyato* (2005).[8]

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[6] Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, ed.James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 67–102.

[7] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 93–101.

[8] The film can be watched online at https://vimeo.com/31901502, accessed September 23, 2019.

Fascinated by the effects that the mirror had on his young son when he saw himself reflected for the first time, Kossakovsky regretted that he had not filmed this process of visual self-discovery. So when his second son, Svyato, was born, he took away all the mirrors in the house. One day when Svyato was almost two, he placed a huge mirror in the playroom and filmed what happened. What we witness in the film is how the child slowly discovers its image in the mirror, first as an other whom he tries to connect to by offering toys, waving and laughing, before getting angry and hitting the image. Then Svyato slowly discovers that the image is himself, pulling faces in front of the mirror, trying out every emotional expression and different poses. At the end of the film the father appears in the image and helps Svyato to recognize himself as himself and as distinct from his father. "Do you like how you look?," the father asks. "Yes," Svyato says, who kisses his mirror image, then embraces his father and runs away from the mirror to continue his play with his toys.

In a very moving way, Kossakovsky presents us the power and importance of this "narcissistic technology of self" that seems to be crucial for the development of healthy self-esteem and a sense of self. But what happens in a culture where we are constantly invited to produce and distribute self-images?

The Culture of Selfies

When he worked on the technologies of the self, Foucault was inspired by Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* that had been recently published.[9] Lasch argued that American postwar life is increasingly characterized by the normalization of pathological forms of narcissism. While the book was often read as a conservative plea for prewar community feeling, family values, and the restoration of authority and classic gender divisions, Lasch explained both in an afterword in *The Culture of Narcissism* and in his following book *The Minimal Self* that this was not his intention.[10] Rather, he wanted to demonstrate that a "therapeutic sensibility" of personal well-being and the need for psychic security made the narcissistic personality a typical symptom of neoliberal media culture, but he did not understand narcissism as just plain selfishness. Returning to Freud, Lasch elaborates the idea of narcissism as part of the psychological repercussions related to

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[9] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979).

[10] Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984).

changes in society. He argues that the pathological dimension of narcissistic culture is not so much related to its secondary megalomaniac forms pure and simple, but rather that there seems to be a kernel of insecurity that narcissism seems to compensate: "narcissists suffer from a feeling of inauthenticity and inner emptiness."[11] And so he returns to (normal and necessary) primary narcissism to sustain a minimal form of self that is under new pressures in the late 1970s. As he puts it,

> The concern with the self, which seems so characteristic of our time, takes the form of a concern with its psychic survival. People have lost confidence in the future. Faced with an escalating arms race, an increase in crime and terrorism, environmental deterioration, and the prospect of long-term economic decline, they have begun to prepare for the worst, … commonly by executing a kind of emotional retreat from the long-term commitments that presuppose a stable, secure and orderly world … to hold one's own life together in the face of mounting pressures.[12]

Lasch adds that it is not just a reaction to sociopolitical danger that makes the subject retreat to itself, but also a response to media culture and "the replacement of a reliable world of durable objects by a world of flickering images that make it harder and harder to distinguish reality from fantasy."[13] The self, in short, becomes the only stable center, an anchor for "psychic survival" in an unstable universe full of "flickering images." Narcissism, Lasch further contends, seeks both self-sufficiency (the perfect self) and self-annihilation (the imperfect and loathed self), which restores the archaic one-ness with the world and the other (the one-ness with the mother before birth, Freud and Lacan would say). The normality of primary narcissism as a first defense mechanism against loss and separation tends to turn into its pathological forms of self-magnification of the perfect self on the one hand, or worthless self-loathing on the other.

While Lasch spoke of the predigital age, his observations are still relevant today, now that the camera switch mode of our cellphones has encouraged a renewed culture of narcissism that we could call the culture of the selfie. The selfie, a digital self-portrait taken with a mobile phone and disseminated on digital platforms such as Flickr (where the first selfie appeared in 2004), Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and other social sharing platforms, is incredibly popular and ubiquitous, realizing what Marshall McLuhan

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[11] Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, 239.
[12] Lasch, *Minimal Self*, 16.
[13] Ibid., 19.

already in the 1960s indicated as the narcissistic appeal of men "fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves."[14] The magnetism of the selfie is a dazzling global phenomenon—one which, in itself, can simply be considered as a way of self-exploration or self-confirmation that, obviously, is not necessarily pathological.[15] Perhaps we can assess these contemporary technologies of the self as yet another response mechanism to preserve a minimal "picture-perfect" self.

So where then is the threshold of the pathological and how does thinking about perfect and imperfect selves interconnect with digital technologies of the self? In his book *Sad by Design* Geert Lovink argues that the narcissism in the selfie cannot be considered as if it were an individualistic trade, but rather is a "technological gesture, produced by a specific hardware condition (a smartphone with a built-in camera, always-on cell, reception, selfie sticks), threading through photography software and dispositions of being."[16] Lovink proposes to critically investigate the acceptance of our selfies being quantified, circulating on Snapchat, Instagram, and other platforms, commodifying our smile and our sadness. He thus takes Lasch's psychological interpretation of the minimal self to a sociopolitical analysis that is crucial. For my purpose here, however, I want to remain in the realm of the psychological and cognitive aspects of selfie culture and the contemporary sense of self.

Clearly there are explicitly dangerous versions of selfies to make the selfie taker noticeable in this "flickering image world." As Bent Fausing argues in his lecture on "Self-Reflection in Digital Media," extreme selfies such as disaster selfies (selfies at the site of an accident), daredevil selfies (on the edge of a cliff, tipping over a boat, on top of a skyscraper, blindfolded driving a car), or sell-tape selfies (where selfie-takers wrap their face in sell tape and look like a Bacon painting) somehow seem to say "I am still a subject and self-reflect myself despite the threat of real danger or disaster."[17] This phenomenon provokes the limits of self-sensing and delivering proof in and as a self-image. What I want to explore here is perhaps another form of extreme selfies, where the selfie taker becomes obsessed by taking and posting selfies. What are the specific conditions that can give further insights in the widespread obsession with selfies and the way they operate on our

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[14] Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 41; Brooke Wendt, *The Allure of the Selfie: Instagram and the New Self-Portrait* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2014), 7.

[15] Elisabeth Day, "How Selfies Became a Global Phenomenon." *The Guardian*, July 14, 2013.

[16] Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 163.

[17] Bent Fausing, "Self-Reflection. To Bend Back, to Mirror, and to Think the Digital Visual Media." Lecture at International Seminar *Reflecting Ourselves Through Digital Media* (University of Copenhagen: 3 November 2016), 6.

psyche? There is evidence that pathological forms of narcissism, selfies and social media use, can become addictive and related to mental illness, even "selfitis."[18] To understand the underlying mechanisms and the possible effects of the selfie on our psyche, and its relation to intolerance of imperfection, I want to extend the psychoanalytic insights that I have started out with, and move to more recent theories and findings in neurophilosophy and cognitive neuroscience.

I Am a Strange Video Loop

In *I Am a Strange Loop*, Douglas Hofstadter departs from the idea that the self does not exist as a fixed entity or thing that we can return to.[19] In making this claim, Hofstadter shares some principles with philosopher Thomas Metzinger and contemporary cognitive neuroscientists who have argued that the self (even a minimal self) is a process in which we constantly shape and reshape the sense of being someone.[20] Our inner image of our self (or self-model) is continuously produced by constructing senses of ownership that function as a "tunnel through reality" that we consider as our ego.[21] Moreover, what is important is that this metaphor of a tunnel works not only for the self but also for the collective techniques of the self. The inner landscape of the self is shaped not just by an individual nervous system but also by a collective environment, which is, increasingly, a media environment. What happens when we see this idea of the self as a continuous process in connection to the technologies of the self in contemporary media culture that proposes that only the perfect is good enough?

Let us first look at Hofstadter's main argument. Fascinated by the age-old question how the idea of an "I" emerges out of mere matter (the cells and atoms of our body and brain), Hofstadter proposes that the "I" is formed in looping patterns between different material and immaterial levels of reality, which constitute the self in experience. These loops are strange, because they somehow flip between lower physical levels of the brain of atomic particles, molecular movements, and neurons and the higher level patterns,

18 Will Stor, *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed* (London: Picador, 2017); Janartanan Balamkrishnan and Mark Griffiths, "An Exploratory Study of 'Selfitis' and the Development of the Selfitis Behavior Scale," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 16, no. 3 (2018): 722–36.

19 Hofstadter Douglas, *I am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

20 Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

21 Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 2009).

the symbolic abstractions where the idea of an "I" takes shape: "Constantly, relentlessly, day by day, moment by moment, my self-symbol is being shaped and refined—and in turn, it triggers external action galore, day after day."[22] Every action and reaction, however minute, is registered, looped back and forth and "my self-symbol slowly acquires concise and valuable insight into its nature as a chooser and launcher of actions, embedded in a vast and multifarious, partially predictable world."[23] In short, the self is an ongoing, constantly looping and updating process, where changes may occur in self-referentiality and the notion of the self may evolve and transform. Even if, in order to call it a self, the idea of a minimal self remains important and occurs when changes stabilize.

The returning image throughout Hofstadter's book is the video feedback loop, a phenomenon that is typical for electronic (video) and cybernetic (computer) media. Video can give immediate feedback on the screen (contrary to analogue film which first needs to be developed), and when one films the screen at the same time that it is projected, the image starts to create whirling feedback loops. But there is a key difference with the strange loops that make up human selfhood: "In the TV setup, no perception takes place at any stage of the loop—just the transmission and reception of the bare pixels."[24] The TV loop, put differently, is not a strange loop that jumps between "acts of perception, abstraction and categorization, between raw stimuli and symbols that imbues the loop with strangeness; … it is just a feedback loop."[25] So the disinterested camera that produces a locked-in loop is not the same as the subjective way of reacting and reflecting of the human brain that constitutes a self. In other words, according to Hofstadter, because the human mind is more flexible and makes *strange* loops, I am not a locked-in *video* feedback loop. And yet, I think here we have a root of the problem of the mechanism of "selfitis," because the problem may have become that we *have* become something like *strange video loops* nevertheless. Video technology as such seems to lend itself more particularly for the self-portrait because of the instant feedback image that it provides, which made Rosalind Krauss propose video as an inherently narcissistic medium.[26] Before returning to video, and digital video by extension, as narcissistic medium

22 Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, 183.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 187.
25 Ibid.
26 Rosalind Krauss, "Video, the Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1, no. 1 (1976): 50–64. See also Raymond Bellour, *Eye for I: Video Self-Portraits*, trans. Lynne Kirby (New York: NY Independent Curators incorporated, 1989); Ina Blom, *The Autobiography of Video: The Life and Times of a Memory Technology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

of unsustainable perfection, first some additional unpacking from cognitive neuroscience and philosophy is in order.

Surfing Uncertainty

Hofstadter's dynamic strange loops that form the "I" can be explained by looking at recent findings in neuroscience. The idea of feedback loops has found evidence in neuroscientific experiments that demonstrate that our brains are prediction machines—machines that are constantly processing and updating incoming information. These ideas of the brain as a feedback processing machine have been synthesized by Andy Clark in his book *Surfing Uncertainty*.[27] We (our bodies) continuously receive sensory input (colors, forms, sounds, smells, and other sensations) and our brain has to figure out what this often ambiguous input means; it does so by constantly making predictions, or educated guesses, about what might be generating the signals imposing on us and by anticipating how to react to, navigate, and understand the world. All this happens for large parts on a very unconscious level, where we are not aware of the patterns that we put to work to make sense of the world, others, and ourselves. However, as Clark argues, "We are not cognitive couch potatoes idly awaiting the next 'input,' so much as proactive predictors— nature's own guessing machines forever trying to stay one step ahead by surfing the incoming waves of sensory stimulation."[28] The predictions work on many levels, where stored knowledge based on previous experiences with the world forms patterns that function as top-down probabilistic generative models. These top-down predictions are confirmed, corrected, and adapted based on incoming bottom-up information in repeated feedback loopings between expectation and the reality of the sensory experience. This is also known as Bayesian predictive processing.

Obviously there is much more to say about this, but the point I want to make in connection to Hofstadter's idea of the self as a strange loop is that there is evidence that these strange loops operate according to Bayesian prediction principles as just described.

Predictions, however, have a speculative element, something we are not sure of as it is not verified yet. There are degrees of probability, but by and large (and on a very basic level of brain activity) we are, as Clark puts it, "surfing uncertainty." Taking this idea of the brain as a foretelling processing

[27] Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action and the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[28] Ibid., 52.

machine that leaves room for mistakes, adaptation, and learning, it is also possible to relate it to the idea of self-recognition. Neuropsychologists have suggested that self-recognition also operates according to Bayesian principles of prediction and adapting to prediction error signals. When I look at myself, how do I know the person I see in the mirror is really me? We continuously assess our bodies and our sense of self as "the most likely to be 'me'."[29] So self-awareness is malleable and also deals with this basic uncertainty, even though the brain looks for the most optimized predictions.

   All this seems very relevant to contemporary digital selfhood, where the selfie becomes the main visual pattern of self-recognition and self-confirmation. The catch, however, is that we might get stuck in the visual feedback loops of contemporary media culture. To return to the question of the possible pathological dimensions of our selfie-culture, I will now turn to some enlightening media cultural case studies to see how the selves in these cases surf the waves of their uncertain imperfect selves looking for perfection. In no way am I arguing that these video feedback loops of the selfie are the one and only cause of pathological narcissism or related mental health issues such as depression and suicide. By focusing on this element of digital culture today, I do want to emphasize that this is an important element in the technologies of the self as picture-perfect mediations and one of the agents in current psychopathologies of media culture today.

A Strange Love Affair with Ego

In her documentary *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* (2015) Esther Gould investigates the question of the self via her own relationship to her two-year older self-confident, beautiful, and creative sister Rowan, who was also diagnosed with a narcissistic personality disorder. We never see Rowan in the film. Instead Gould follows four Rowan-like girls in their quest to become successful by gaining a great career, great friends, leading an independent and interesting life, while at the same time she has a virtual dialogue with her sister via letters in voice-over or text images. Gould clearly admires these outgoing characters in their expressive and narcissist self-centeredness, but she also shows their vulnerability, their doubts and insecurities. In fact, the film intelligently and respectfully articulates how self-images can turn into

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[29] Manos Tsakiris, "Looking for Myself: Current Multisensory Input Alters Self-Face Recognition," *Plos One* 3, no. 12 (2008): 1–6; Matthew Apps and Manos Tsakiris, "The Free-energy Self: A Predictive Coding Account of Self-recognition," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 41 (2014): 85–97.

infernal technologies of the self when the ego swims in a sea of freedom and responsibility "to be your own product;" and when the self seems completely determined by self-designed and aestheticized externalized images.[30] In contemporary media culture the question of "Who am I" seems to be in need of confirmation in the realm of the spectacle of social media, and of likes and ratings that are constantly fed back to us. What does this do to our sense of self, the film is asking. The freedom to create one's self-image has a flip side: not only do we zap from one mirror image to the next but it also becomes harder to find a healthy connection to one's own "minimal self." There is great uncertainty and loneliness in this mirror hall of freedom and self-production. One of the girls in Gould's film takes selfies all night, posts them on all her social media platforms, and waits for any likes and comments.

They don't come. Characters in *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* struggle, almost literally asking "what is the selfie most likely to be me?" but getting lost and trapped in the strange video loops of the selfies and responses in their media profiles.

They are not the only ones. Psychological studies that deal with narcissism and social media put Gould's filmed characters in a contemporary context of the digital age. A recent study from the American Psychological Association indicates that curating one's own perfect public image becomes all the more a burden when "exposure to other's perfect self-representations within social media intensify one's own body image concerns and sense of social alienation."[31] Studies among Facebook users conclude that narcissism is correlated with more intense use of social media, while positive self-esteem is correlated with less active social media use.[32] Another study on posting selfies on social network sites investigates the gratifications of posting selfies and reports some of the answers indicating: "My main reason for posting selfies is to let people know that I have a social life and to make it seem like

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[30] See also Boris Groys, "Self-Design and Aesthetic Responsibility," *E-flux Journal #7* (June–August 2009). Boys also raise the issue of uncertainty, arguing that (self)design is "primarily a mechanism for inducing suspicion." He indicates that "every act of aesthetization is always already a critique of the object of aesthetization simple because this act calls attention to the object's need for a supplement in order to look better that it actually is" (3).

[31] Thomas Curran, "Perfectionisms Is Increasing over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016," *Psychological Bulletin* 145, no. 4 (2019): 412.

[32] Soraya Mehdizadeh, "Self-Presentation 2.0: Narcissism and Self-Esteem on Facebook," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 13, no. 4 (2010): 357–64; Agata Blachnio, Aneta Przepiorka, and Patrycja Rudnika, "Narcissism and Self-esteem as Predictors of Dimensions of Facebook Use," *Personality and Individual Differences* 90 (2016): 296–301.

I am constantly doing something fun and cool."[33] It seems a strategy of self-centered perfectionism for psychic survival indeed.

Thus, we create strange love affairs with our Ego's that hide an authentic and very fragile quest for the self that is going on underneath all the images that we put out there in the online world. As indicated at the beginning there is nothing wrong with a certain primary form of narcissism, self-esteem, and self-love. On the contrary, a minimal or core self is important for a healthy sense of self.[34] However, our media technologies of the self seem to invite more easily pathological forms of narcissism, where it becomes harder to find any alternatives between a larger-than-life, exaggerated sense of self, always perfect, beautiful, and loved by everyone; and a less than zero, a diminished sense of self that is worth nothing. In such fragile situations of insecurity, predictive processing (and the normal construction of a minimal self), it turns out, comes with a dark side. Predictions about the self can go awry, leading to delusions and hallucinations that compensate for ontological insecurity. Esther Gould's sister Rowan is a tragic case in point. She was convinced that Madonna was deeply in love with her and was waiting to pick her up at LAX airport. Arriving in Los Angeles, obviously there was no Madonna waiting for Rowan. She was then diagnosed with an extreme form of pathological narcissism: self-magnification and self-annihilation going hand in hand, with tragic and deadly consequences. In 2007 Rowan committed suicide.

Cruel Perfectionism

In her "Notes on the Perfect" Angela McRobbie expresses her worries about the dangerous and terrible consequences of these mental health conditions of picture perfectness entangled with our media apparatuses from a feminist perspective.[35] While psychoanalysis and neurosciences may tell us something about the underlying psychological and brain mechanisms of our current forms of narcissism, McRobbie points out another dimension of the same phenomenon. She argues that Foucault's technologies of the self are indeed

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[33] Taylos Wickel, "Narcissism and Social Networking Sites: The Act of Taking Selfies," *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 6, no. 1 (2015): 1.

[34] Other psychopathologies, especially those on the schizophrenia spectrum, also seem to be related to a distorted or lost sense of a minimal self. See for instance Michel Cermolacce, Jean Naudin and Josef Parnas, "The 'Minimal Self' in Psychopathology: Re-Examining the Self-Disorders in the Schizophrenia Spectrum," *Consciousness and Cognition* 16 (2007): 703–14; and Vittorio Gallese and Francesca Ferri, "Psychopathology of the Bodily Self and the Brain: The Case of Schizophrenia," *Psychopathology* 47 (2014): 357–64.

[35] Angela McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times," *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no. 83 (2015): 3–20.

part and parcel of contemporary neoliberalism, which is grounded on the violent idea of perfectionism, the self-generated pressure to be flawless, based on unrealistically high standards that are implicitly based on social pressure.[36] McRobbie gives several heartbreaking examples of contemporary cultural life that demonstrate how the perfect life and the perfect body have become the impossible-to-live-up-to standard, especially for girls and young women. She refers among others to the suicide of journalist, television presenter, and model Peaches Geldof, who a few months before her self-chosen death (at the age of twenty-five) had written a column in a women's magazine "extolling the joys of the perfect domestic idyll … which she had created with her husband and two small babies."[37] In spite of appearances, the reality of depression and addiction caught up on the illusion of the perfect life, which McRobbie designates as a form of "cruel optimism," a term introduced by Lauren Berlant.[38] Perhaps we should say *cruel perfectionism*.

McRobbie's feminist analysis focuses in particular on the "apparatus of the perfect" as the specific technology of the self that shapes contemporary female subjectivity, inviting women to live up to the impossible task of having it all (career, motherhood, sexual and social life, beauty and youth), coupled to an ethos of competitive individualism; all intensified by displaying these successes on social media, collecting "likes" and followers. As McRobbie surmises: "The *dispositif* of the perfect expects the young woman to 'fix' things for herself, by means of a constantly monitored life-plan. It is a practical mode of self-government and … a handmaiden for contemporary neo-liberalism."[39] Returning to her earlier work on the girlish style of Carrie Bradshaw's *Sex in the City*-like postfeminist masquerade (where young women seem childlike and needy, and deep down desiring domesticity, and thus not dangerous to the existing norms of patriarchy) McRobbie argues that contemporary feminism, instead, is translated into an inner drive of perfectionism that also keeps women at a safe place away from power because their striving for flawlessness and overburdened psychic life will catch up on them.

We can find many examples of McRobbie's observations in popular culture where images of perfection and individual competitiveness are thriving. The main character in Darren Aranofsky's film *Black Swan* (2010), ballet dancer Nina Sayers, played by Nathalie Portman, is a case in point. "I just want to

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[36] See also Paul Hewitt, Gordon Flett, and Samuel Mikail (eds.), *Perfectionism: A Relational Approach to Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2017); and Paul Hewitt Gordon Flett (eds.), *Perfectionism: Theory, Research and Treatment* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2002).

[37] McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect," 3.

[38] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[39] McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect," 7.

be perfect," she explains her obsession with endlessly practicing her fouetté turns in front of her mirror.[40] While Nina does not constantly take selfies, and the film makes clear that her possessive mother—who expects her daughter to fulfill her own failed dreams—is also a reason for the development of her mental breakdown, clearly her drive for excellence and perfection belongs to the competitive neoliberal condition of creating your own success. "The only person standing in your way is you," Nina's choreographer whispers in her ear while she sits in front of one of the many mirrors in the film. And so she goes on and on, strains her body, develops anorexia, exhausts her mind, starts to hallucinate. The film puts us directly in her mental world and makes us understand how reality and illusion start to blend under such oppressive conditions, to the point where, once more, perfection can only be reached in death.

Nicolas Winding Refn's *The Neon Demon* (2016) takes up the issue of competitive femininity from the dark angle of the LA fashion world. As Linor Goralik demonstrates elsewhere in this volume, fashion is a site where (bodily) perfection is contested with special fervor. In Refn's film, a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl, Jesse (played by Elle Fanning) enters the jungle of the modeling industry. She is an immediate success, mainly because she shines with youth, purity, and innocence, something that everybody wants to have a slice of. In an interview for *Sight & Sound* Winding Refn specifies that he wanted to make a film about the insanity of beauty.[41] He demonstrates this by showing how his protagonist develops from guiltless girl to malicious narcissistic adolescent, surrounded by jealous comodels and predatory agents and photographers. Winding Refn's style is more symbolic, surreal, and over-the-top bloody and violent than the realistically portrayed hallucinations of *Black Swan*, but the message is by and large the same: competitive and embodied striving for perfection is deadly.

A last film worth mentioning in respect to the violence of pursuing narcissistic gratification in image culture and social media is Brady Corbet's *Vox Lux* (2018). In this film Celeste (another role by Natalie Portman; her younger self is played by Raffey Cassidy) is a super celebrity, a pop star who rises to fame after surviving a school shoot-out and singing at a memorial service a song composed by her sister. While clearly Celeste is not perfect (her performances are rather mediocre), the point here is that media culture has made her into a superstar who is conceived as flawless: because she is famous, she must be perfect. *Vox Lux* also painfully shows that this perception is

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[40] Patricia Pisters, "I Just Want to Be Perfect: Affective Compulsive Movement in *Black Swan*," ed. Anne Rutherford. *Cine-files, #10*, special issue *Cinematic Affect* (2016).

[41] Christina Newland, "The Beauty Myth," *Sight&Sound* (July 2016): 26–30.

turning around an empty shell. The film shows Celeste's denial of and struggle with her hollow sense of self, while keeping up the performance onstage. The violence in the film evolves neither from self-exhaustion, as in *Black Swan*, nor from jealous attacks, as in *The Neon Demon*, but from the selfishness of survival and fame, explicitly coupled to the mechanisms of terrorism. School shootings and other gun attacks run through the narrative, pointing to the same online and digital media mechanisms to gain attention and effect.[42]

"Have the Decency to Meitu Yourself"

The preoccupation with the self may have originated in the Greek tradition of the idea of "a good mind in a beautiful body," or "kalokagathos," but the cell phone and global media culture have made the selfie "world famous."[43] HoneyCC, for instance, is one of China's biggest online influencers on Weibo and on China's largest video-sharing platform Meipai, with her own makeup brand and millions of followers. As Jiayang Fan notes in her article on China's selfie obsession, like many other online celebrities and influencers, HoneyCC became a multi-millionaire by posting selfies in branded clothing or fashion items, which then sell by the tens of thousands.[44] She is also connected to Meitu, Inc., the company that launched, among others, a photo-editing app that is also named Meitu, which means "beautiful picture" in Chinese. In 2016 it had over a billion unique users worldwide (half of them in China and other Asian countries). The Meitu M8 phone automatically "upgrades" any selfie to a better version of yourself: your phone can make your face whiter, narrow your jaw, slim your cheeks, widen your eyes, make you thinner, or, with the Beauty Plus filter called "mixed blood," create an Eurasian appearance. All "tailored toward a standard of beauty—mostly female beauty—that is particular to China and countries like South Korea and Japan: pale skin, elfin features, skinny limbs, eyes wide and guileless as a baby seal."[45] The app's standards for beauty are very comparable to the features of Jesse in *The Neon Demon*, indeed. Referring to the competition to get into universities and to find a good job, to many users the app to beautify yourself is seen as a step

[42] Also indicated by Groys: "In our time, every politician, sports hero, terrorist or movie star generate a large number of images because the media automatically covers their activities." Groys, "Self-Design," 1.

[43] Will Stor, *Selfie: How the West Became Self-Obsessed* (London: Picador, 2017).

[44] Jiayang Fan, "China's Selfie Obsession: Meitu's Apps Are Changing What It Means to Be Beautiful in the Most Populous Country on Earth," *Annals of Technology*, December 18 and 25, 2017.

[45] Amie Tsang and Emily Feng. "China's Meitu, an Aspirational Beauty app, Goes Public." *The New York Times*, December 14, 2016.

toward success in work and society, democratizing beauty. "Many women always feel like they have flaws," said Ms. Liu, twenty-three, a graduate film student who uses Meitu to narrow her face, shrink her nose, and remove dark circles from under her eyes. "They all wish that through some kind of method they can make themselves more beautiful. Meitu is the cheapest and most convenient way to do this."[46]

According to Jiayang Fan, on average people take forty minutes of editing their face before uploading it to social media, usually involving several apps, each with their particular strengths. We see here another variation of the video looping mechanism operating in Bayesian patterns, looking for the best version of the self, with the particular effect that the distance between the Meitu mirror reflection and reality (or reality in the actual mirror) becomes larger. It is no wonder that the beauty industry and plastic surgery have also grown exponentially to reduce this gap between selfie and reality in China and elsewhere in the world.[47] Often this leads to desired results. On the other hand, social norms make it harder to accept any flaws that reinforce the use of Meitu products. Meitu's chairman confirms that editing your pictures ("to meitu") has actually become a matter of ordinary courtesy: "In the same way that you would point out to your friend if her shirt was misbuttoned, or if her pants were unzipped, you should have the decency to Meitu her face if you are going to share it with your friends."[48]

This last point brings us back to Foucault's neoliberal technologies of the self as biopolitics: social norms are internalized and become self-imposed standards of perfection. Combine this with other social standards of accumulating social credits for perfect behavior that China is now testing (the correct smile, the right cloths, keeping to all the rules), all measured by other media technologies such as facial recognition, ratings, likes and algorithmic surveillance, and we have entered the science fiction reality of *Black Mirror*. In the episode *Nosedive* (S3E1 2016) of this popular Netflix sci-fi series, living up to the rules of perfection has become the normativity that is impossible to live up to. The episode demonstrates how technologies

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[46] Ibid.
[47] China seems to be at the forefront of the selfie-cult and cell phone obsession. The relation between social media, irrational body ideals, body dysmorphia, eating disorders and increase in plastic surgery in the United States, Canada and Great Britain is also indicated in Curran, "Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time," 412. See about the phenomenon of selfie-surgery also, for instance, the *Vice* video "I Got Surgery to Look like my Snapchat and Facetune Selfies," https://video.vice.com/en_asia/video/plastic-planet-i-got-surgery-to-look-like-my-snapchat-and-facetune-selfies/5bedcd66be40775d88072966. In his epic short film *Zombies* (2019), shot in Kinshasa, Congolese-Belgian artist Baloji addresses the lure of the selfie in an African context; see https://vimeo.com/329764956.
[48] Fan, "China's Selfie Obsession."

of the self come to coincide with technologies of power when optimal self-versioning has become not just a quest of the self but a civic duty. We soon might need jewelry that molds faces into perfect smiles, indeed, as proposed by Linor Goralik later in this book. Or we need to reintroduce the acceptance of bodily flaws, as suggested by Yuriko Saito in a previous chapter.

Media as Pharmakon

All these cases above demonstrate McRobbie's point that the *dispositif* of perfection is the trap of neoliberal competitive individualism that in particular women are sensitive to. When they do not meet their internalized standards of beauty and perfection, self-discipline and self-punishment in endless looping patterns may lead to anorexia, orthorexia, and other obsessive compulsive disorders; depression and suicide are the real and present dangerous consequences. In addition to McRobbie's feminist observations I would like to add that while girls and women are indeed more vulnerable to these new social (media) pressures,[49] it is by no means that men are not susceptible to these new challenges of perfectionism. As Will Stor observes in his book *Selfies*, men may be more obsessed with their muscles, but they are not immune to eating disorders and to creating the perfect body image.

   In the Norwegian television format *True Selfie* (2017), we see both young men and women struggling with their mental health in constructing a sense of self that can comply with their self-expectations. In this program (the format was also exported to Dutch television), eight adolescents are asked to film themselves during several weeks in which they explicitly show their more vulnerable sides and struggles. Once a week the participants convene for a group therapy session in which they talk about their psychic struggles of depression, social anxiety, obsessive sporting, and eating disorders. Clearly none of them can handle their inner norms of perfectionism. Narcissus can't live up to the extremities of self-imposed societal norms of beauty, health, and social success. But showing their vulnerable and imperfect "true selfies" might help themselves as well as others. Participants of *True Selfie* indicate that making *imperfect* selfies helps them to get a better grasp on their self-image.[50]

[49] Dennis Campbell, "Depression in Girls Linked to Higher Use of Social Media," *The Guardian*, January 4, 2019.
[50] For the claim in question see https://www.npo3.nl/true-selfie/17-04-2018/BV_101387566.

This makes *True Selfie* a good example of what we could call a *media pharmakon* of the contemporary mediated sense of self, referring to Derrida's revival of another Greek term: the *pharmakon* that designated both poison and medicine.[51] On the opposite spectrum of the shackles of picture-perfect mediations, there are many examples of the ways in which social media helps people to create a version of themselves that they feel more happy with and connect to others. Besides the acceptance of true and imperfect images of ourselves, an important case in point for the positive effects of selfies are the transgender transformation vlogs that show and share the process of becoming man/woman/transgender on social media. These vlogs are an important help in community building, self-acceptance, and changes in social normativity about gender fluidity.[52]

In sum, we need to consider the different elements and mechanisms that can render these new technologies of the self as oppressive, when the constant visual feedback loop of the digital video image proposes an unbalanced self-image of a picture perfectness that is impossible to live up to. The selfie has its origins in video technology, which is a technology with narcissistic characteristics. Our current selfie culture is an extreme form of this narcissistic medium's perpetual intrusion, and we have to acknowledge both its liberating effects of creating our own self, as well as the risk of creating feedback lock-ins of images of cruel perfection in which one may lose one's ability to connect, to others and even and especially to one's self.

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[51] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 63–171.

[52] Tobias Raun, "Video Blogging as a Vehicle of Transformation: Exploring the Intersection between Trans Identity and Information Technology," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 10 (2014): 1–14; Tobias Raun, *Out On-Line. Trans Self-Representation and Community Building on Youtube* (London: Routledge, 2016).

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