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Making Selfies/Making Self: digital subjectivities in the selfie.

(Talk version of paper: *The Model, the #realm, and the self-conscious thespian: the digital subject in the selfie*)

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Introduction

A selfie is a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically via smartphone and uploaded to social media (Oxford 2013), and although the word is relatively new to our vernacular—coined word of the year by Oxford dictionary in October of 2013—the phenomenon is not an entirely new one. The various viral “origin stories” of the selfie reveal that there are familiar and uncanny qualities to the popular phenomenon. One viral image proclaims a man in Australia took the first selfie—an image of his own inflamed lip after a late-night bar brawl. Various other viral origin images show youthful celebrities who were doing it before it even had a name: a young Jack Nicholson with Stanley Kubrick on the set of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, or a mirror selfie of a dapper Colin Powell. The recent unearthing of Vivienne Mair’s tomb of mysterious New York street life photos include, according to many media, a collection of selfies taken in the reflection of local shop front windows. Still other origin stories of the selfie align the phenomenon with the history of self-portraiture in fine art, and thus to the great works of Durer, Rembrandt, and Parmigiano².

These invested commitments to an origin story of the selfie reveal to us that the selfie has an interwoven relationship and association to a multitude of visual media that came before it.

The selfie does remind us of old-fashioned amateur photography and therefore to the family album, the nostalgic childhood images, and the *punctum*³ of these captured moments from our past.

But the selfie also reminds us of self-portraiture, and art history, and therefore the existential intrigue many artists have experienced in crafting an image that was to be representative, to some degree, of him or herself.

In many ways it is true that the selfie isn’t really new. Rather, like much new media, the selfie can be conceived of as a multimodal convergence of older and newer technologies: the selfie is a mirror, and a camera, and a stage or billboard all at once (Warfield 2014; Teigland 2013). As such, the selfie becomes a bit of a paradox for research. If it comprises multiple technologies of self-reflection then from what ontological standpoint do we address it? If it’s a camera, then do we address it from the standpoint of photographic theory or art history? If it is a mirror, then do we address it from the standpoint of perception, cognition, or perhaps Lacanian psychoanalytic theory? If it is a stage or a billboard then perhaps it is a communicative text...and thus we hear the pitter patter of the excited feet of scholars from media, communication, cultural studies, theatre or film studies.⁴

Selfies emerge from a convergence of technologies and as a result the phenomenon requires converged, cross-disciplinary theoretical approaches from fields as vast as, media and cultural studies, art

¹ Thanks to Dr. Edward Schiappa (MIT) for methodological guidance on the data analysis of this stage of my research.

² The full name of Parmigiano (colloquially known as the “little one from Parma”) was Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola

³ Here I borrow the notion of punctum discussed by Roland Barthes

⁴ Scholars interested in selfies are connecting interdisciplinary relationships as wide ranging as autobiography and dataveillance (Rettberg 2014), celebrity and identity (Marwick 2014; Senft 2014), sexuality and the body (Albury 2014; Tiidenberg 2015), and audience research and embodiment (Warfield 2014; Lasen 2009) as well as the importance of power, and socio-economic privilege in the practice given the cost of cellphones or computers to produce selfies (Marion Walton 2014).

history and visual culture, Internet, technology and social media studies, anthropology, sociology, and film studies.⁵

The dominant media discourse in Canada decries selfies as narcissistic vanity rituals by (predominantly) vacuous teenage girls. The ontological presuppositions of this discourse have problematic consequences. First, this discourse presumes that selfies are primarily visual texts to be read. And if this is the case, then when a selfie exhibits the body of a woman, the female body in the image becomes textual, flattened and reduced to a 2-dimensional disembodied deflated site of power relations. This “reading” process entirely neglects or ignores the subjectivity of the women in the image, her intended uses of the image work, and the embodied and felt experiences of the image producer.

There exists and is being produced a significant amount of research looking at the visual content of social media images (like Lev Manovich’s SelfieCity project), elsewhere I and others have also undertaken post-structural and feminist critiques of various forms of selfies to reveal the power matrices that shape the tropes and conventions within the frame of the image⁶. But both these methods still see the selfie as text and thus remain on the outside of the image looking in. The research in this project attempted to step through the image and into the image making process, by talking with the embodied and emplaced image-makers themselves in the world on the backside of the image.

As a result, I took a phenomenological standpoint, which forged a connection between image and body, rather than a Cartesian/positivist cleaving of the image from the body that produced it. By exploring the person producing the image, the place of production, as well as the potential emotional and bodily relationships users had to these new digitally-circulated images as a connected whole process, the discussion became not just one of what the images say to various readers, but rather what the relationship is between the producer and the image in the process of image-making and how does that relationship provide insight into the emerging digital subjectivities for this group of plugged-in young women? I was interested in examining whether the ontological framework that was emerging for the study of digital images was complete and considered, and comprehensive⁷.

A very condensed and reductionist summary of the findings of my study indicate that according to an online questionnaire of 42 female avid-selfie takers, coupled with four in-depth phenomenological interviews (conducted earlier in the summer), the digital subjectivities that young women experience through the phenomenon of selfies parallel the multimodal format of the selfie itself. If the selfie is a camera, a mirror, and a stage, then through the image making phenomenon, young women experience themselves at once as if they were in a photo (as a model), on a mirror (as the #realme), and on a stage (as, what I’m calling a self-conscious thespian).

Literature Review

In the literature review—which here I will keep very concise—I drew upon cultural and communication theorists who have written about subjectivity, but particularly theories of subjectivity that incorporated either directly or metaphorically the three technologies of self-reflection that make up the selfie: the photo, the mirror, and the stage, and so the literature review was divided into these three sections. In the section

⁵ The interdisciplinary nature of selfies as a phenomenon is markedly illustrated by the expansive backgrounds of researchers of the Selfies Research Network (1500 members strong it is arguably the largest group of international scholars studying the phenomenon of selfies www.selfieresearchers.com). Many of who were attendants at the recent gathering of the Association of Internet Researchers 15 in South Korea: jilltxt.net for many of the presentations.)

⁶ Belfie, Selfie, Harlot, Sexpot: If Kim Kardashian’s Butt Selfie could talk, this is what it would say. <https://kwantlen.academia.edu/katiewarfield>; Elizabeth Losh’s feminist reading of the SelfieCity Project is a thoughtful analysis of the project.

⁷ Although here I focus specifically on a smaller group of Canadian women, this reflective, dialogic, and qualitative approach could be expanded to explore the layered digital subjectivities of any number of diverse social groups. This sort of research is a necessary partner to the movement to distill “big data” trends from digital images which again privilege the reader and the image, without listening to the image maker and recognizing the post-structural power matrices implicit in the production of any form of image making.

on the camera, I drew on theories from visual culture looking at the Cartesian subject in art history and then photography and photojournalism (Christian Metz, Martin Jay, Susan Sontag). I then explored the effects of Cartesian subjectivity on the female subject in art history and photography as critiqued by theorists like Marsha Meskimmon and Gen Doy.

In the section on the mirror I examined the psychoanalytic subject as proposed by Jacques Lacan—a subject whose existence is entirely dependent on its mirror image. I then explored feminist critiques of the woman as a subject of Lacan’s mirror as articulated by theorists like Luce Irigaray. In the section on the stage, I explored theorists who explored the dramaturgical self—or the self as performance—whether mediated in every day face-to-face and discursive encounters (like Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault) or whether mediated on a canvas or screen (like John Berger, Laura Mulvey, and more recently Theresa Senft 2008.)

Methodology⁸

Research Design

We produced an online survey with few closed-ended and predominantly open-ended questions to ask young women (aged 16-28) in the Vancouver Lower mainland about the practice of taking selfies, but ontologically we approached the topic from a phenomenological standpoint—which positioned the selfie broadly as a phenomenon rather than first and foremost a communicative text. This meant that we were first and foremost interested in the embodied, experiential, emotional, and emplaced phenomenon of the selfie. The research questions treated “selfies” as a phenomenon with many stages, opportunities and places for meaning-making and experience: 1 the inspiration to take the selfie, 2 the preparation to take the selfie, 3 the arrangement and composition of the selfie, 4 the taking of the selfie, 5 the reviewing, editing, deleting and saving of selfies; and, 6 what is done with a selfie at the end (posting or other). The research questions were:

1. On what occasions and in what circumstances do young women take selfies?
2. How do young women describe the various stages of the phenomenon of selfies?

Findings⁹

Theme 1: The Subject on the Stage (the self-conscious thespian)

The first theme, which related to the research question about spatiality (or where and in what circumstance young women took selfies) illustrates that for many of the young female participants, the subject in the selfie is a performing subject who deeply deliberates over the ethics of self-presentation in both online and offline spaces. The category of “public/private” came up repeatedly by young women who detailed appropriate places to take selfies versus inappropriate places to take selfies. Most young women said that they took selfies in private because they felt “judged”, “ashamed”, or “embarrassed” when they took them in public. Young women who did take selfies in public would pick places that would be “more appropriate” for the act, for instance they would take selfies in “tourist spots” where many other people would also be taking photos. They would also take selfies in public with friends (“usies”) but not in public alone.

As a result most young women said they took selfies in private locations. The majority of young

⁸ For details on sample group, participants characteristics, recruitment methods, ethics, and research design, please see full article publication (2015).

⁹ Expansive details on data analysis are in full journal article. Short details: The online survey asked both closed-ended and open-ended questions, and so the analysis was mixed-method. Researchers used simple statistics to analyze closed-ended questions, and content analysis for open-ended responses. A coding sheet was developed to analyze the open-ended data from the survey. The coding identified statements, which were then grouped into subcategories, categories, and finally overarching themes for phenomenon of selfies.

women said they typically took images in bedrooms, bathrooms, their cars, or somewhere in their house. One young woman summarized this by saying “I’ll take them in any and all places but not in public where people are able to watch me do it”.

Many young women contemplated the ethics self-presentation in online spaces too. For instance one young woman said: “I look for the best [image] but I won’t post a selfie taken in my bedroom, by myself... you know the ones people are chastised for taking.” Another young woman said “I’d post a cute one on facebook, but not a sexy one. If it was a sexy one, maybe I’d put it on Instagram.” There is ample space within these themes of policing one’s actions in online, offline, public and private spaces to further explore and relate to Goffman’s notions of front stage and back stage and Foucault’s technologies of the self, self-governance, bio-politics, or theories relating to the “conduct of conduct” (Burroughs 1959; Foucault 1976).

Theme 2: The Subject of the photo (the model)

Four categories emerged from the content analysis that supported the second theme, which is that, in the process of taking selfies, the young women in the sample group experienced themselves as photographic subjects. Most of the young women both presented themselves photographically, by adopting photographic tropes and conventions in their self-presentation, and assessed the quality of their self-images through photographic standards of aesthetics. By this we found that when looking at themselves in the camera lens, many young women enact and use photographic tropes and conventions to present themselves in what they deem to be favorable ways. For instance many young women would assess and adjust lighting/exposure, locations/composition, post/ posture/ expression, and hair/makeup.

Most young women said that apart from seeking an image that looked “good”, they also sought “good lighting”, “good background”, and images that were not blurry or out of focus. Apart from lighting some young women used technical terminology like looking for the correct “ISO” and “exposure” of the picture and using specific filters to “highlight” and “increase contrast” to correct qualities that weren’t—according to them—“right”.

Some young women said they borrowed conventions and poses from magazines and celebrity photos in preparing their poses. One young woman said, “with friends, no [I don’t pose]. By myself absolutely, I imitate models and try out “artsy” poses.” Most young women use the front-facing camera first as a mirror and then as a camera to fix their hair and makeup, as well as to “test out lighting” to see if the location they are in would offer up what they determined to be a quality image. One young woman said in preparation of the image she will, “flood hair and touch-up make up, [and] position [her]self in front of [the] mirror to ensure best possible angle.”

These findings support both Cartesian and post-structural theories like those of Berger, Mulvey, and Doy. When young women become the subject of the photo they play with and amidst classic photographic conventions of the female form, and then assess these tropes based on the same aesthetic standards of that medium, for instance, by focusing on physical details such as hair and makeup. When young women choose the right lighting, pose and posture, they are choosing from those that have become embedded as the acceptable visual grammar of the female form in North American visual culture. Most young women presented themselves as smiling and happy—the learned visual convention of portrait photography. Most young women prepared their hair and makeup so as to make themselves look “attractive”, “pretty”, “cute”, and according to them, “better” or “best”.

Theme 3: Sensing the #realm in the mirror

Coupled with being a subject on a stage and in a photo, the third theme was that young women sought a sense of bodily, experiential, and expressed ‘authenticity’ in the selfies they produced.

The step-by-step process young women use to produce a selfie is a highly emotional one. Several young women said that the process made them happy but equal to this were young women who said the

process made them feel “ashamed”, “silly”, “vulnerable”, “exposed”, and “embarrassed”. Goffman explains a key feeling associated with backstage play is “embarrassment” as the subject plays with various non-typical personae before presenting a socially normative front stage self (Goffman 1959). Many young women described how, in the process of reflecting on, deleting, and seeking the right image, they would feel happy and validated if they could find a good one but felt “defeated” and “sad” if they couldn’t produce a good image.

Two categories supported the theme of sensing authenticity: 1) young women said that they sought images that were authentic and that were satisfying.

In this search for the right image, most young women said they sought an image that they felt was “authentic”, “real”, “not fake” and “not forced”. One young woman said, “I have a tendency to plaster on a fake 'photo smile' which I do not like because I don't look genuine. So any of those are scrapped and the best is the one in which I look happy or think I look pretty/confident/nice etc.” Parallel to this young women said they sought an image that felt “real” and “natural”. One young woman said “the photo that I choose as the best is the one where my skin looks the best, face looks the slimmest, smile is the most 'genuine', the one I look the prettiest in.” This statement illustrates well the multi-subjectivity of the image producer as she mediates between the photographic self and what she proclaims to be the “authentic” self.

The measure of authenticity seemed to have an intangible and visceral quality for many young women. Several young women used the word “satisfying” to describe the photo they liked the best. Although the young women analyzed the images photographically looking for minute and calculated details in the images, several young women said that when they found the right image, the image would “hit” them and “just feel right”. As one young woman put it, “I'll take a break in between looking at them and when one catches my eye more than others I usually go with that one.” Another young woman said, “It's the photo where, when you see it, it's like BAM! Everything is right”. Finally to some young women, authenticity also relates to photos that were not prepared or seen as staged. One young woman proclaimed, “I don't prepare to take a selfie because I want it to be real and not staged”¹⁰.

Finally about one third of the young women said they would take selfies only for themselves not to be shared via social media. Bypassing the socially constructed restrictions on self-presentation, one young woman said she would return to the image at a later date privately “to see when I looked good and boost my confidence” and free from the ethics of self-presentation in public spaces. Elsewhere I've called this phenomenon the “digital taliswoman”¹¹—an image mantra young women use as confidence bolsters while going about their daily routine.

Conclusion & Future Directions

Cybernetic subjectivities

Young women experience various subjectivities in the production of the selfie and these subjectivities are framed by the dominant subjectivities propagated by the converged technologies that make up the selfie: the photograph, the mirror, and the stage. But alongside the dominant subjectivities of these three technologies, an important subjectivity that is experienced by many of the young women is an embodied subjectivity influenced by body, space, place, and feelings. The standpoint not addressed in the literature review, but which is important to mention at this point, therefore, is phenomenology and the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which positions the subject as necessarily dependent on the material world and body in which it exists (Merleau-Ponty 1945). This study suggests theories related to embodiment and phenomenological subjectivity as necessary in the study of online digital subjectivity too. This finding is particularly important given the prevalence of contemporary writing that conceives of and celebrates the

¹⁰ It is important to detail the subjectivity of the term “authentic” at this point since it has been found elsewhere that a contemporary visual convention to achieve a “sense” or perception of authenticity is to capture images of the mundane because the banality of everyday life is more “authentic” (Cohen, 2005; Davies 2007).

¹¹ Warfield, Katie. The Treachery and the Authenticity of Images. TEDx Talk, Sept 17th, 2014. Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

digital self from a post-humanist standpoint where either the mind supersedes the body or the body no longer is an entirely necessary factor in digital subjectivities (Kroker & Kroker 1997; Overboe 1999). But such a proposition is both ideologically-loaded and incorrect in light of our research. This study suggests a reconsideration of the disembodied ontology of post-humanism. Apart from our research, various other scholars from a variety of disciplines have suggested similar, with a return to the body as a starting point when theorizing the visual in an age of digital media (Sonia Livingstone; Martin Lister 1995; Marsh Meskimmon 1996; Vivian Sobchak 2004). Is it possible to extend the materiality of phenomenology to the presumed to be non-material space of the Internet and social media?¹²

It is important to mention that this research is not suggesting that the body holds the true/a more true/ or transcendental subjectivity than the other subjectivities mentioned in this paper. Rather the only thing this research reveals is that the material, spatially located, embodied offline subject is felt, experienced and connected to the subject of the image in the often online selfie. Whether the “felt” connection is a transcendental connection to a pure sense of self, whether the ‘felt’ connection to the image is one’s psychic connection to an imagined or symbolic self (Lacan), whether the connection to the self is the recognition that the image of the self aligns with the aesthetic tropes, conventions and standards of beauty established by photography and more broadly mass media (Cartesian). These are the limits of our research. But the point here is not to state the measure or degree to which these subjectivities comprise the self but rather the recognition that various subjectivities are experienced by young women in the process of creating the selfie.

In sum, this research suggests that for our sample group of plugged-in young women, digital subjectivity should rather be digital subjectivities because subjectivity is experienced as multi-layered and multi-modal, which is why it can at once be disembodied, and body-focused, while at the same time felt, emotional, and subjectively embodied.

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¹² This is a core research question I will be exploring this coming year.