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Narcissus Confirmed: Technologies of the Minimal Selfie

By Geert Lovink

Neuroplastics for Tomorrow: “I cannot believe in a God who wants to be praised all the time.” Nietzsche—“Killing joy as a world making project.” blog motto—“In the present state of our social and economic accounting, I find it impossible to say where necessary personalization ends and unnecessary personalization begins.” David Riesman—“Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope, but not for us.” Franz Kafka—“Things fall apart. There’s nothing you can do. Let a smile be your umbrella.” Jim Houghan—“We do not believe in the world empowering women. We believe in women empowering the world!” Vilein—“It is never my appearance that surprises me, but more so the fact that I show up at all.” Gabrielle Stein—“Those who laugh have not yet heard the bad news.” Brecht.

<http://www.gdi.ch/de/Think-Tank/Trend-News/Daten-Selfie-Spiegelbild-im-Netz>

„Im Gegensatz zu einem Foto-Selfie bildet das Daten-Selfie nicht nur die äussere Schicht einer Person ab, sondern zeichnet auch ihr biologisches und emotionales Innenleben auf – ihren Biorhythmus, ihre Bewegungen und ihre Beziehungen.“

<http://www.leninology.co.uk/2017/02/on-forgetting-yourself.html>

For many cultural critics, the selfie is symbol for neo-liberal self-promotion. There is a constant pressure to perform, to show-off, be present. The selfie embodies the desperate attempt by the ‘failed individual’ to show that she (or he) still in the rat race: I am alive, don’t forget me, look at me and think of me, next time you can do me a favour. The selfie as a digital object

‘On retaining the self in a dehumanizing society’ is the subtitle of Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Informed Heart* (1960). The selfie craze, starting with myspace but taking off big time after 2010 with the Iphone’s first front-facing camera, should be read as a possible survival strategy under harsh neo-liberal circumstances. Selfies are evidence that “men are not ants” as Bettelheim’s final chapter suggests. They aim to install dignity with design. Bettelheim discusses the survival strategies in Nazi concentration camps in which being itself was faced with “man’s destruction by his society”. Looking into the future beyond the mass grave, Bettelheim summed up his analytical endeavor: “The success or failure of any mass society will depend on whether or not man so reshapes his personality that he can modify the society into one that is truly human; into one where we are not coerced by technology, but bend it to our human needs.”¹ Instead of focusing on ‘the extreme situation’ as Bettelheim did, we can ask ourselves what autonomy might possibly mean in the age of neo-liberal hegemony. Is the selfie the expression of the ‘informed heart’ in the networked digital age?

We’re no longer obsessed with the hidden, contradictory nature of man that is supposed to be located behind the smooth images of the self. That’s the reason behind the demise of psychoanalysis as a cultural method. The problem with the binarized nurture vs. nature debate is that it is impossible to underestimate the role technology is playing. There is no self/ie outside the smart phone and social media. When it comes to camera angles, there is nothing left to be uncovered, or deconstructed: key features are highlighted, lightning and background checked, duckface is out, mirrors

are your friend, blurry is fine, work your angles, a sultry expression is a bonus. The passion of the image is no longer a mystery. What remains hidden is the logistics of the image, from the 'like economy' to the political economy of the cloud, from the codex of one's camera to the filters and compressions of software. But first, how do we deal with the selfie phenomena beyond forced participation or moral accusation, and develop ways of seeing that integrate machine readable interpretations?

Both the art history and pop culture experts tend to agree that the self-portrait and the selfie speak to different audiences, of different subjects. "The self-portrait and the selfie are two separate, though at times overlapping, efforts at establishing and embellishing a definition of one's self."² Those both for and against the selfie often see it as a defensive impulse to locate and protect an 'authentic looking' subject through self-portrayal. Its makers, especially during the rise of the phenomenon, are described as self-obsessed and compulsive. According to Alicia Eler "the selfie is a mirror, an illusion of a mirror, an egotistical moment wrapped in time, and an embarrassing moment post-shave."³ An example of such 'organized narcissism' would be the 2015 book of 352 Kim Kardashian selfies, published under the title 'Selfish'.

The complex difference between the portrait and the selfie marries perfectly when the selfie as "a mode of conversation, inherently contextual and often ephemeral" proves to be the perfect marketing vehicle for art museums caught up in the like economy, dependent on visitor self-reports. Such contextual readings give little away of the energies of either practice.

The advice we get everywhere is to 'never apologize' for selfies. But who's afraid of being mistaken for Narcissus? Herbert Marcuse promoted the comeback of Narcissus, and was criticized for this. "If we believe what we're told by mass media, selfies are narcissistic, a product of a self-absorbed populous, vanity rituals of the me-me-me generation. Selfies are made by people, mainly girls, lacking in self-confidence, seeking constant validation from their peer group and beyond."⁴ In this forced intimacy, the viewer is between the camera and the subject, wrapped within the arm of the image taker. Are they narcissists or are they negotiators? They are the ones that hold the camera now, they pose to be looked at, they perform and experiment.

A 'selfie' is defined as a photo in the selfie form; in other words, it is already a repetition that defers to other selfies. It is also a data trace that thrives on hash tags and categories, and is thus the opposite of the singular image that aims to express authenticity. These imitations are habitual shortcuts, automated gestures, compressed gestures, in short: visual signs, utilized in order to escape artistic pretence. The selfie gesture is the message, all it does is demonstrate presence, not a particular mood or feeling. They may express mass conformity: 'I fit into this format'. But they are also an expression of Christopher Lasch's 'minimal self', a broken subjectivity that plays with irony. The ego is no longer considered a work of art; merely to uphold dignity amongst millions is a constant effort. What are the small differences allowed within these social pressures of individuated mass culture?

How can we make a diagnosis that does not reduce users to addicts, which can claim the freedom to formulate a radical pathology without declaring everyone sick. In this technologized society it is becoming harder and harder to defend the right to freely theorize. Let's defend this intellectual space and surpass the old dichotomies of cultural studies vs. Frankfurter Schule by overcoming political correctness on either

side. The same can be said of the reading of selfies as as mere “portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding.” (Peter Buerger, p. 48). The selfies as technical networked images are anything but autonomous.

Christopher Lasch’s 1979 classic *The Culture of Narcissism, American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, marked out a problem already: “Emotionally shallow, fearful of intimacy, hypochondriacal, primed with pseudo-self-insight, indulging in sexual promiscuity, dreading old age and death, the new narcissist has lost interest in the future.” According to Lasch “narcissism is a difficult idea that looks easy—a good recipe for confusion.”⁵ Lasch explains this attitude comes out of a mood of pessimism, characteristic to the mid-late 1970s, reflecting a general crisis of western culture. According to him, “narcissism refers to a weak, ungrounded, defensive, insecure, manipulative self.” Forty years later we can witness a collapse of psychology into the everyday, where technologies of the self materialize into habitual practices of the multitudes and can hardly be identified as ‘symptoms’. We actually lack black melancholy. There is no *intended* indifference here. There also seems to be no interest in the future, and equally little in the past. In line with the tumult of the 70s era, this collapse of chronology has created a vacuum that one now constantly needs to have filled with evidence of presence, a consolation of losing the sense of historical continuity. The ‘present personality’ is competitive at the level of visibility, however avoids direct competitions in a game-like setting. You have already won if someone’s noticed, and ‘liked’ your form.

In step with Lasch, we need a theory of this minimal self(ie). Selfhood has become a luxury, out of place in an age of impending austerity. People have lost confidence in the future and begun preparing for the worst, resulting in an “emotional retreat from the long-term commitments that presuppose a stable, secure and orderly world”⁶— and a beleaguered form of selfhood. As Lasch stresses, time and again, narcissism should not be confused with selfishness and egoism. It is instead the confusion between the self and the non-self that defines narcissism. The feminine play of desire for union with the world is hardly a symbol of cultural decadence and national failure. The problem here is not selfishness or an emphasis on self-absorption but our lack of awareness about the status of digital portrayals in the age of face-recognition software.⁷ Selfies are not even being seen as the symbol of decline they were imagined to be few years ago. At its analytical best, the fashion reveals social media’s hidden obsession with ID registration, and the collective necessity to repeat one’s visual presence.

A more materialist treatment of the practice can entertain these gestures as at least potentially subversive mass photo practices. The selfie is a prime example of individuation, the process described by George Simondon that Bernard Stiegler so often speaks about.⁸ As a product of an apparatus (as defined by Vilem Flusser), the selfie works out the conflict between the psyche and the collective in a technological document that is neither authentic nor industrial (but digital).⁹ In many instances, the smart phone is anthropomorphized and used as a displaced object. What’s important to investigate further is the link between individuation and identification—on a mass scale. We should not be surprised that the self can and will be used as currency given these images are indeed used as photographic evidence in the bureaucratic process of identification. With Bernard Stiegler, we can say that there is a cognitive and affective proletarianization or deskilling happening, an anamnestic knowledge of images, a process where the externalization of memory becomes hyper-industrial. The selfie is

an integral part of this process.

What is the faith of the online subject in this kind of presentation? We are not in the terrain of any truth therapy or self-examination of conscience. We're not seeking spiritual direction or alignment while updating our statuses. Social media are not "techniques oriented towards the discovery and the formulation of the truth concerning oneself."¹⁰ They are not tools to know, but instead, to control, one's self—for better and worse. That, at least, is the anxiety of the heavy-using teenagers that Sherry Turkle deals with in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*.¹¹ The purpose of social media is not the transformation of the individual. Selfies do not tell us what is hidden inside the self. Our attempts to read introspection into a selfie bounce off at the media surface. The object watches us: the selfie is watching back.

American political scientist Jodi Dean disagrees with the douche moralists that "dismiss selfies as yet another indication of a pervasive culture of narcissism." What's central is the temporality of the selfie. "It's not meant as a commemoration. It doesn't memorialize what we've done. It's a quick registration of what we're doing. On Twitter, Instagram, Grindr, Facebook and Snapchat, selfies flow past, a kind of ongoing people's fabrication of the now." This shifts the discussion from the level of representation and its place in the archive to that of real-time culture. Selfies can be read as proofs of utter presence, not as evidence of electronic solitude, let alone a symptom of a personality disorder; they do not exemplify who we are but show that we exist, at this very moment. Selfies are existential moments in a technological time, or a 'temporal hallucination' in Roland Barthes words.

The aim is to read amorally, and make a next step in the development of a technologically informed self-hermeneutics. The selfie, while being a kind of next-level portraiture, can be read as the end product of the democratization of media, ending the scarcity stage of image making, a symbol of our nihilist age of overproduction. The self-taken picture is one that does away with any need for assistance from proximate others, and aims at seeking the responses of absent or desired others.

Jodi Dean described selfies as images without viewers in this sense.¹² Adilkno's concept is of sovereign media: broadcasting to one's self.¹³ Dean on the other hand perceives selfies as a "communist form of expression". Instead of praising or condemning our superficial egos, Dean stresses the social intellect of the image, or its circulation value, as she calls it. Dean does not see an existential digital monad that leads us further and further into the empty essence of the Western self but instead positions the selfie inside the social network of relationships. For Dean the provocative term 'communism' is a reference to the common(s), not to some repressive avant-garde party that imposes its political and economic will on the people. In the selfie context, common means something less than full collectivity, namely, a 'minimal common', or what used to be called a mass or crowd. Dean: "Multiple images of the same form, the selfie form, stream across our screens, like the people we might pass walking along a sidewalk or in a mall. When we upload selfies, we are always vaguely aware that someone, when it is least opportune, may take an image out of its context and use it to our disadvantage. But we make them anyway as part of a larger social practice that says a selfie isn't really of me; it's not about me as the subject of a photograph. It's my imitation of others and our imitation of each other. To consider the selfie as a singular image removed from the larger practice of sharing

selfies is like approaching a magazine through one word in one issue.”

Milanese political economist Alex Foti has less crypto-optimism than this, linking the selfie to a rising precarious existence that needs additional media validation to keep the inevitable nature of individualised anxiety at bay. In an email interview he wrote: “It is a culture of naked, desperate self-promotion out there. My picture exists on social media and so do I. The earlier practice of Hollywood stars of taking snapshots of themselves (what we did in photo booths before the advent of the cell phone) has extended to the precariat at large: we're all aspiring starlets neurotically manicuring our own image for commercial appeal. Selfiemanía bespeaks of existential uncertainty: Who am I? Am I really there? Am I what my own image projects?”¹⁴

For Foti, the selfie is first and foremost a tool for self-promotion. “Selfies are increasingly taken to make other people aware or envious of the trip to Europe or Antarctica and thus project a marketable self. A precarious person is constantly on sale in what are spot markets for temp labor. Hirings are increasingly made on our self-image, which has become a sort of avatar of our abstract capacity for symbolic labor in the affective economy of social media. It’s all about exuding fake happiness and self-satisfaction. Nobody takes selfies of oneself in a blue or angry mood; snapchat filters force you to be playful and funny.” For the activist in Foti there is always hope that the camera eye will be turned to the turbulent world outside. “One of the surest signs that a rebellion of the precariat is under way, either in Paris or Hong Kong, is the fact that thousands of vertical screens are aimed at the spectacle of the multitude rather than at your precarious self.”

A few years ago, Croatian independent media theorist Ana Peraica took over the photography shop of her deceased father in the Roman coastal town of Split. Peraica has just finished a study on the selfie, a topic that she found herself thrown into while in Split, where on a daily basis she was surrounded by flocks of tourists. I asked her why and how she was utilizing the term ‘narcissism’ in a such a free way.¹⁵ Ana: “What I found interesting about the myth of Narcissus was that it was mis-comprehended in terms of visual culture, as Narcissus never made a self-portrait, he did not need a stored image but an active self-reflection in the water, in which previous images are completely irrelevant, as it is based on the process.” Peraica points out that narcissism has been excluded from the American edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, appearing only as a symptom of psychopathic behaviors. Around the same time, the fake diagnosis of ‘selfitis’ (the ‘disorder’ of being addicted making selfies) was introduced into the media sphere and was claimed to be recognized by American Psychiatrist Association (APA), which is, of course, not true.”

Instead of claiming that people who take selfies either need to go and see a doctor, or prove to us how their liberated, balanced life style results from such ‘tools of self-examination’, how might we frame these images otherwise? Ana: “I am of the opinion we have entered the third cultural phase of Narcissism, the one more closer to the original myth of Narcissus, speaking of a full self-abandonment, that was already visible in media art pieces, which were producing self-portraits on a participatory level. They showed that there was no fixed self, but selves that are exchanged. Boundaries and integrity of selves do not exist anymore—not because of selfies but because of a slow media-based deconstruction of personal needs and scenarios.”

Everyone is only too aware that we are taking selfies in the Snowdon age. Ana: “We are surrounded by a strong surveillance system that is now running on voluntary self-exposure by which a Narcissus objectifies itself to be reminded what is the subject again, a surveillance system formerly known as Echo. And in that process there are plenty of calls for help, fears exposed, showing again how photography and imaging are becoming very important for a culture unable to self-formulate differently, ie by speech or writing.” Ana concludes that selfies are not bad in themselves but a consequence of many bad influences: the loss of communication, decay in education, and the disappearance of text as we knew it. We are becoming empathic machines almost mechanically reacting with a smile and a LOL to whatever happens.

Can we talk about the narcissistic personality in the selfie context, as if it were an individualistic trade? Not really. The selfie is first and foremost a technological gesture, produced by a specific hardware condition (built-in camera inside a smart phone, software that facilitates phone pictures, selfie sticks), threading through software and dispositions of being. We cannot talk about the selfie, therefore, and remain silent about the like-economy, the billion dollar advertisement and surveillance market of people’s private data, in which the selfie and the likes it generates are traded behind the back of user’s smiles.

¹ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, Avon Books, New York, 1960, p. 260.

² <http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/whats-the-difference-between-a-selfie-and-a-self-portrait/>.

³ Alicia Eler, *Mirrors Multiply the Selfie: The Doppelgänger Dilemma*, July 8, 2013, <http://hyperallergic.com/74877/mirrors-multiply-the-selfie-the-doppelganger-dilemma/>.

⁴ Taken from YouTube recording of lecture *Why I love Selfies and Why you should too* (damn it) by Katie Warfield, Vancouver, March 26, 2014.

⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Warner Books, New York, 1979, p.22

⁶ *ibid.* p. 16.

⁷ See for instance the project of the St. Petersburg founders of the facial recognition app Findface, the photographers Artem Kukharenko and Alexander Kabakov. With Findface one can compare a picture taken in public space with the databases of the selfies online, for instance of the Russian social media site VKontakte. The software is extremely precise and make it possible to find out a person identity in an anonymous crowd with a success rate of 70%. See:

⁸ Frequent references to the individuation concept can be found in Bernard Stiegler, *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 101-125.

⁹ More on this in Bernard Stiegler, *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism*, Cambridge, 2014, p. 72-74.

¹⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Warner Books, New York, 1979, p.26.

¹¹ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation, The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Penguin Press, New York, 2015.

¹² Jodi Dean, *Images without Viewers: Selfie Communism*, 1. February 2016, <http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/2016/02/iii-images-without-viewers-selfie-communism/>.

¹³ Adlino, *Media Archive, Autonomedia, Brooklyn*, 1998, p. 12-15.

¹⁴ Quotes from email interview, June 15, 2016.

¹⁵ Quotes from email interview, June 20, 2016.