

The background of the entire page is a dark blue grid. Overlaid on this grid are numerous white silhouettes of people, mostly women, in various poses. Many of these silhouettes are holding up smartphones, suggesting they are taking selfies. In the background, large, semi-transparent letters of the words 'Selfies', 'Instagram', and 'Network' are repeated in a pattern.

# The Allure of the Selfie

*Instagram and  
the New Self-Portrait*

BROOKE WENDT

**Network**<sup>08</sup>  
**Notebooks**



# **The Allure of the Selfie**

*Instagram and  
the New Self-Portrait*

## COLOPHON

**Network Notebook #08**

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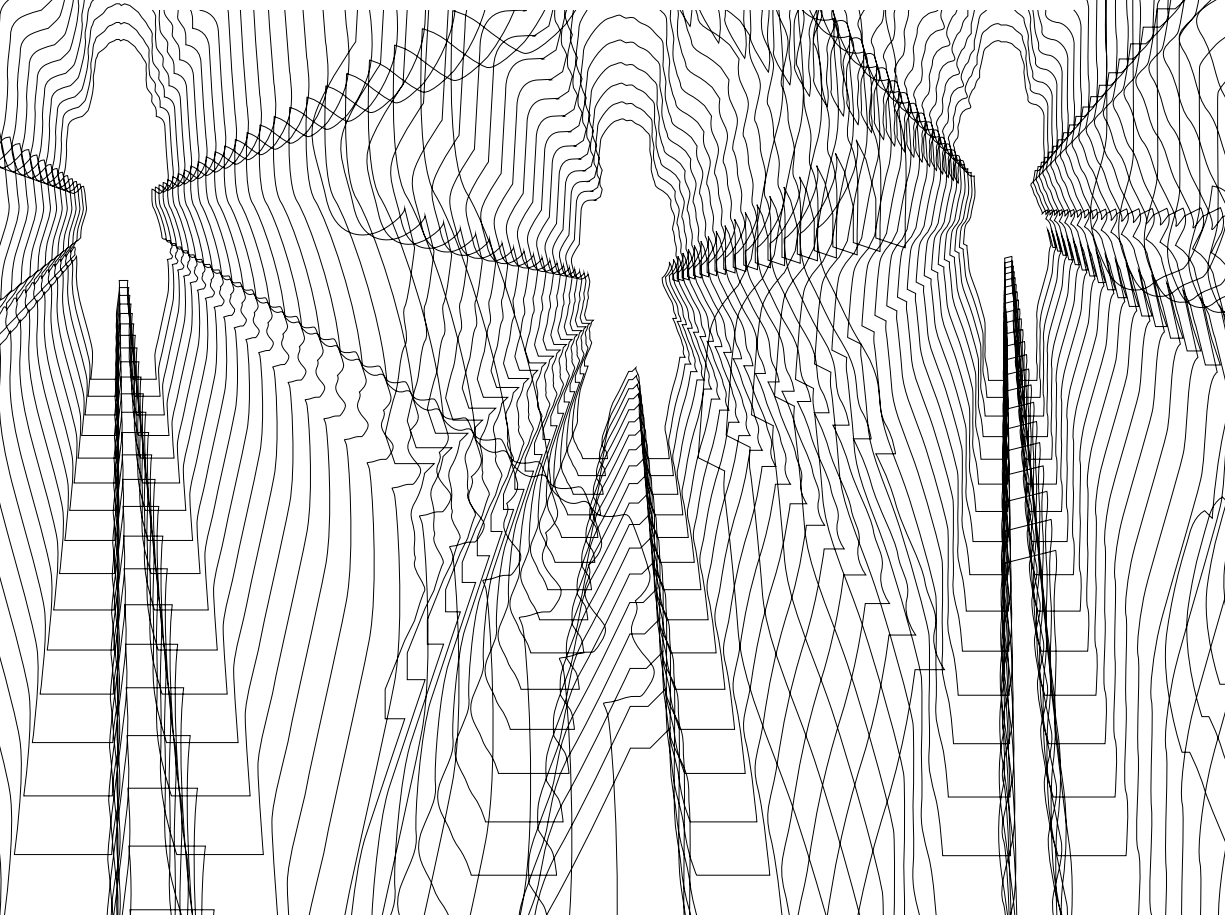
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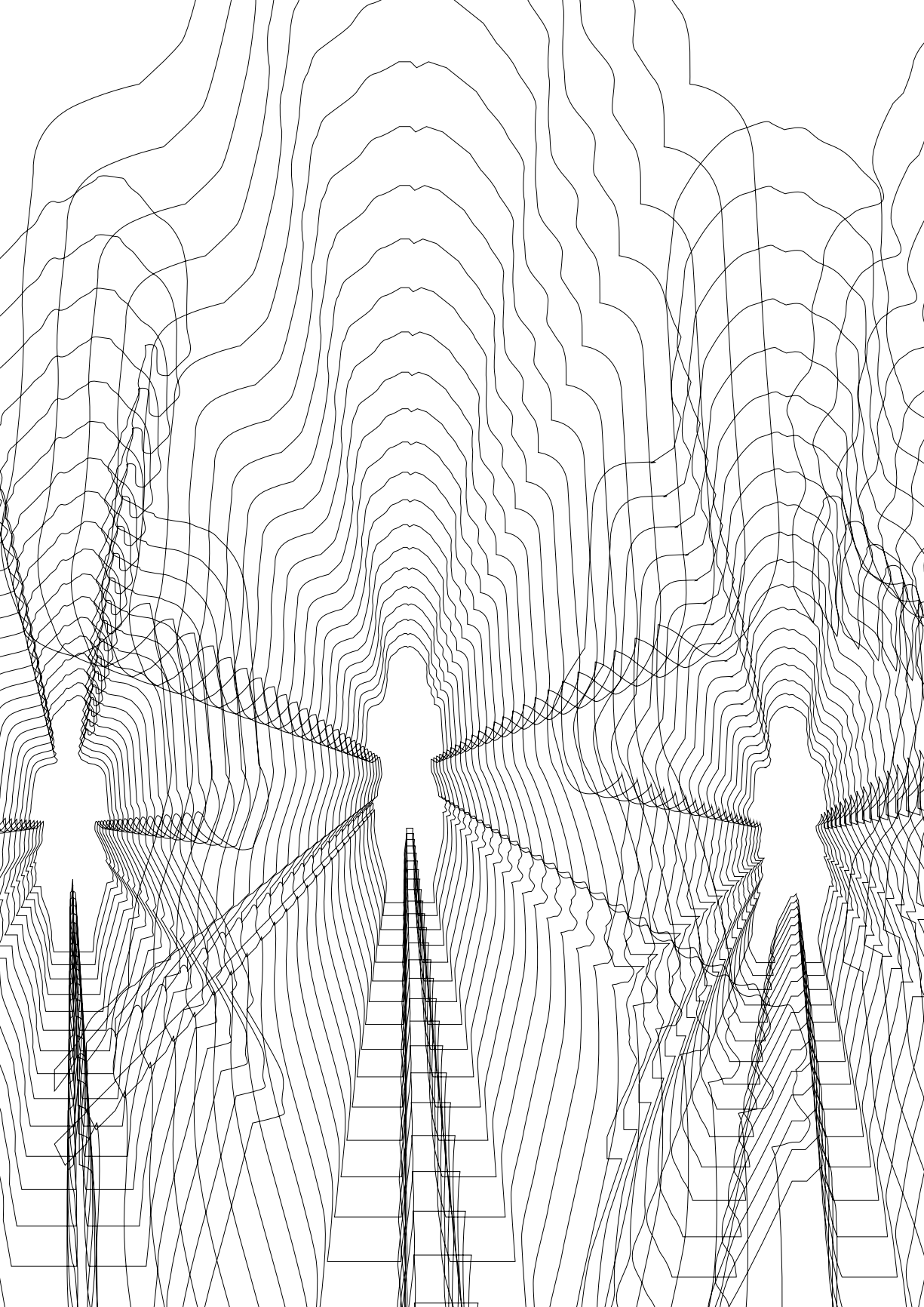
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# Introduction

## THE APPEAL OF THE SELFIE

More than 130 million user images and videos have been hashtagged with the word 'selfie' on Instagram. #I, #me, #myself, #self, #selfie, #selfies, and #selfportrait account for over 439 million user images and videos as of June 2014. According to journalist Elizabeth Day, the first #selfie image appeared on the image-hosting site Flickr in 2004.<sup>01</sup> This type of digital self-portrait is taken with a mobile phone and characterized by its ubiquity. The social image-sharing platform Instagram, which is an app designed for iPhone and Android, allows people to capture, stylize, and share images with family, friends, and strangers via their smartphones. This app is extraordinarily popular, as it is an all-in-one photographic program that processes and publishes an image in seconds. With numerous image filters and hashtags at our disposal, Instagram creates infinite possibilities to customize selfies. Although we can alter images of ourselves with instantaneous and automated effects, the ability to express our individuality is restricted to the set of commands within the program. Instagram, it seems, has defined the look of an entire generation.

It was perhaps unforeseen that people would generate an astronomical amount of selfies and that our desire to capture and share selfies would become a global phenomenon. This attraction to selfies appears to be similar to media theorist Marshall McLuhan's reframing of the Narcissus myth in which he explains that 'men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves'.<sup>02</sup> McLuhan, in contrast to the popular version of the Narcissus myth, observes that Narcissus did not fall in love with himself – but rather, numb to his image, he could not recognize his reflection as his own. We seem to be experiencing a similar situation of misrecognition when we use Instagram. As though unaware that we are looking at ourselves, we become numb to our self-portraits and produce many different versions of ourselves. Moreover, we appear to be lured to, and seem powerless to resist, Instagram's tools for creating ever-greater stylized identities.

Fascinated by the promise of pluripotentiality, we create numerous selfies with many different looks that can be hashtagged to theoretically unlimited and virtual locations. As we tilt, raise, and lower our smartphones to find the best angle of ourselves on screens, we build perceptions about ourselves that are constructed purely from within screens. Instagram, thus, is not just a way to produce images but it is also an active means for some people to establish their identities – viewing the ubiquity of their selfies as a mark of distinction.

Czech media theorist Vilém Flusser, in his book *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, observes that photographers use the camera in an 'attempt to find the possibilities not yet discovered within it'.<sup>03</sup> As though he foresaw the appeal of Instagram, Flusser's writings elucidate the image capture practices of many people. It is as if we create selfies to search for an ideal version of ourselves and, in this process, we 'seek to exhaust the photographic

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01 | Elizabeth Day, 'How Selfies Became a Global Phenomenon', *The Guardian*, 14 July 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/jul/14/how-selfies-became-a-global-phenomenon>.

02 | Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994, p. 41.

03 | Vilém Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion Books, 1983, p. 26.

program by realizing all [our] possibilities'.<sup>04</sup> Perhaps we are afraid that our images – *our selves* – will run out and therefore we produce selfies in excess.

Precisely this type of activity is cause for concern. If 'photographs remain undecoded', Flusser warned, 'they accomplish their task perfectly: programming society to act as though under a magic spell for the benefit of cameras'.<sup>05</sup> For example, one can witness the power of this spell upon society in several YouTube tutorial videos titled 'How to Take a Selfie'. In one of these tutorials, make-up artist Michelle Phan demonstrates how to 'capture the best version of yourself' and explains how to light your selfie, hold your smartphone, position your arm, hold your neck, find your best angle, study your face, and look 'cuter'.<sup>06</sup> As she revolves her smartphone around herself in this video, Phan appears to engage with her screen as if it were more than a machine as it captivates her attention. Perhaps, our preoccupation with Instagram is simple: it offers us infinite versions of ourselves, as though each picture promises a better version.

It could be said that people who study themselves from a purely visual standpoint are more likely to ignore the non-visual aspects of their personalities. Those who seek to establish an online presence may perceive the physical self as the totality of a being and not consider individual traits, such as movement and voice, as components that *build* an identity. Scholars have theorized that the selfie could serve as a mode for people to express themselves, seek attention, or become part of a community.<sup>07</sup> Although these theories appear to be present in one selfie or another, it seems as though the selfie enables us to detach from reality. Per McLuhan, the act of viewing one's own image generates feelings of numbness but also self-amplification.<sup>08</sup> By gazing upon our reflections, we receive momentary relief from stressful situations or personal anxieties – a break from reality. We are amplified by this process and therefore receive satisfaction from capturing and viewing selfies.

In fall 2014, ABC TV network will launch a comedy series titled *Selfie*, which addresses the ramifications of a woman obsessed with herself and her social media presence.<sup>09</sup> The show's trailer implies that the main character's use of social media disconnected her from herself and the people in her environment. This character has to relearn how to function as a person pre-social media. Despite that this show is produced for a mass audience, the notion of replacing one's self with a virtual and trend-driven version speaks to a larger problem: we fragment ourselves through electronic mediums for the sake of expression but lose a portion of ourselves in the process. Moreover, we do not realize how picture-taking influences behavior outside of social media because we rarely experience separation from social media. Under these circumstances, Instagram has the ability to influence and perhaps technologically determine personality.

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04 | Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy*, p. 26.

05 | Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy*, p. 48.

06 | Michelle Phan, 'How to Take the Perfect Selfie', *YouTube*, 5 September 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbqIQcKNE7E>. This video has over 2,500,000 views.

07 | Alise Tifentale, 'The Selfie: Making Sense of the "Masturbation of Self-Image" and the "Virtual Mini-Me"', *Selfie City*, (February, 2014): 7, [http://d25rsf93iwlmgw.cloudfront.net/downloads/Tifentale\\_Alise\\_Selfiecity.pdf](http://d25rsf93iwlmgw.cloudfront.net/downloads/Tifentale_Alise_Selfiecity.pdf).

08 | Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, pp. 42-43.

09 | QuickFirePromos, 'Selfie Trailer ABC', *YouTube*, 13 May 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQqozmwIE00>.

## THE INFLUENCE OF THE SELFIE

It is difficult to pinpoint the attitudes and behaviors that have developed from using the camera since it has been ubiquitous for most of the 20th century. It seems almost impossible to determine if the use of Instagram has created new capture behaviors or exacerbated old capture behaviors. Kodak, the dominant camera company of the early 19th and late 20th century, advertised the camera as a superior device. Kodak's ads give the impression that the camera created special moments and united families. The Instagram app enables people to take pictures without restriction and does not have the same physical limitations as the snapshot camera. Thus, people rarely question whether or not to snap pictures. As part of my research, I compare Kodak advertisements to smartphone commercials in order to illustrate how ads and commercials have influenced image-capture behavior.

Marshall McLuhan's reframing of the Narcissus myth explains our inherent fascinations with our mirror images in the age of digital media. Those who repeatedly take selfies may experience numbness and amplification more intensely than others. These types of users seem addicted to this activity and therefore produce images of themselves multiple times a day. Moreover, Instagram has designed a platform that keeps us engaged with our images. The program also allows us to generate conversations with ourselves via selfies and social networks, which keeps us even more occupied with our digital reflections. Through a critique of user selfies, I theorize and question the potential motivations for people to take selfies as part of my second essay.

With the use of the filter function, we have the opportunity to become even more fascinated with ourselves by stylizing our images to look as though they are from the past. The filter function simulates the look of physical age on photographs, which gives our selfies more importance than average self-portraits. For example, this faux-aging process gives us the look of someone who has aged and acquired a certain wisdom that is time-dependent via photographs. Journalist Ian Crouch, for example, notes that the filter function generates 'instant nostalgia' by replicating the physical signs of age.<sup>10</sup> I push arguments like his further by theorizing that people use the filter function, as the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard described, to look at themselves 'as if they were already dead'.<sup>11</sup> I propose in my third essay that the filter function enables people to view themselves as if they were already dead to reassure themselves that they will outlive themselves through their virtual self-portraits.

As though we wish to exist beyond the confines of our physical bodies, we transmit selfies to virtual locations via hashtags. Although it is not commonly recognized, the hashtag's ability to share our images has transformed the pro/noun 'self' from singular to plural. Hashtags appear to restrict how we express ourselves to others on Instagram since we describe ourselves as metadata. Many people do not consider the hashtag to be a constraint, as it facilitates the transmission of their images. As part of my critique of selfies, I analyze how hashtags alter the meaning and perception of selfies in my fourth essay.

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10 | Ian Crouch, 'Instagram's Instant Nostalgia', *The New Yorker*, 10 April 2012, [http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/04/instagrams-instant-nostalgia.html#slide\\_ss\\_0=1](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/04/instagrams-instant-nostalgia.html#slide_ss_0=1). Crouch explains, 'Instagrammed photos emphasize photography as an elegiac or twilight art, one that rushes and fakes the emotion of old photographs by cutting out the wait for history entirely, and giving something just a few seconds old the texture of time'.

11 | Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, p. 87.

The advent of the snapshot photography enabled people to enact two gestures in their self-portraits, which can be found on Instagram to this day. The first gesture, which seems to signify willingness, involves a person standing in front of a mirror with his or her camera present in the image frame. The second gesture, known as ‘the unwilling subject’,<sup>12</sup> symbolizes resistance to image capture. In this type of image, the person blocks his or her face from the camera with his or her hand. In my final essay, I question whether or not people have the ability to resist the appeals of cameras and selfies, as some gestures of resistance have become gestures of *willingness* on Instagram.

In its digital state, the self-portrait is complex and full of visual and computational nuances as it is layered with information we have yet to decode or understand. The use of the smartphone and the presence of the network influences how we engage with and create our selfies. Filters and hashtags add new data to our selfies, which make them more than average self-portraits. The selfie, however, seems less like a self-portrait in a traditional sense, as it is formulaic, frequently produced, and ubiquitous on Instagram – it becomes indistinct on this image-sharing platform. These indistinct selfies appear to have turned users’ identities against themselves, as users generate images of themselves as though they are mass produced products. Essentially, Instagram diminishes one’s individuality.

The amount of selfies that we have produced over the last four years supports McLuhan’s theory that we are drawn to our images and receive relief when viewing them. Instagram provides more ways for us to engage with our images than ever before, which feeds our selfie obsessions. Some of us are unaware of how much we rely upon Instagram to express ourselves and do not recognize how our personalities and self-awareness change through its use. Similar to Flusser’s observation about photographers – ‘they do not want to change the world, but they are in search of information’<sup>13</sup> – we seem to be in search of information about ourselves via our selfies. But after gazing upon hundreds of self-portraits do we know more about ourselves? Perhaps we take selfies to fulfill the function of the program rather than fulfill ourselves.

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12 | Diane Waggoner, ‘Photographic Amusements’, in *The Art of the American Snapshot 1888-1978*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 20.

13 | Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy*, p. 27.

# Message: Camera Ads and Smartphone Commercials

*Popular taste expects an easy, an invisible technology. Manufacturers reassure their customers that taking pictures demands no skill or expert knowledge, that the machine is all-knowing, and responds to the slightest pressure of the will.*

- SUSAN SONTAG, 'IN PLATO'S CAVE'

In her essay 'Photographic Amusements', Diane Waggoner observes that in the early days of photography, picture-taking was an 'important means of memorializing and recording personal history'.<sup>14</sup> Instagram users have similar intentions for their photographs, but their practices of – and, therefore, ideas about – recording personal history are substantially different from that of film camera photographers who were limited to 24 to 36 frames per roll of film. We rarely practice selective picture-taking, and this elimination of physical constraints via smartphones has drastically changed the purpose of photography, shifting attention from preservation to accumulation.



FIGURE 1: ELIZABETH SHIPPEN GREEN, KODAK, 1906, ADVERTISEMENT, HARTMAN CENTER, DUKE UNIVERSITY.



FIGURE 2: KODAK, 1910, ADVERTISEMENT, EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY.

14 | Waggoner, 'Photographic Amusements', p. 19.

The ways in which the camera has been advertised to us has had great impact on our attitudes toward image capture. Kodak, the dominant camera company of the early 19th and late 20th century, promoted the camera's ability to preserve moments through its advertisements. Children also appear in many of Kodak's ads to demonstrate the camera's everyday use (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). This approach may have led adult consumers to conclude that the camera was a toy and not consider that it could create unrealistic standards of appearance for people to maintain. Kodak's advertisements became increasingly misleading as its ads conveyed that perfection could be achieved by taking pictures. To this day, people often idealize and interpret photographs as pieces of reality and do not view photographs as scenes captured or planned by photographers. These types of advertisements seem to have set the standard for the ideal photograph as well as the behavior needed to capture it.

In the advertisement shown in figure 1, the camera is comfortably situated in the children's play area. This scene signifies to the viewer that its presence would not be disruptive and could, in fact, help maintain stability in the home by occupying youngsters. From a contemporary viewpoint, it appears that the success of the camera's assimilation into the consumer's everyday habits relied upon his or her perception of the device as one capable of uniting family members. The two children are shown quietly playing together with the camera, as though in a state of concentration. This advertisement suggests that an ordinary moment can become special through the use of the camera. Moreover, a moment can become precious once it is made permanent. In this way, the camera takes on significant importance as it can freeze reality and turn reality into a special moment with just a press of a button.

Kodak introduced to the public the notion that one needed little skill to use the camera by showing children as the camera's operators (see fig. 2). In this advertisement, Kodak advertises to its audience that 'such pictures appeal to you because they are natural; they *show the children as they are*, among everyday home surroundings'. Although the camera captures the children's likeness, it is debatable if the pose they create for their photograph is natural as posing for a picture is learned behavior. The children's stillness appears to be a mode of surrender, and it is unclear to what extent the children modified their behavior in the presence of the camera. As the children obey the camera in order to record their picture, the camera takes on an authoritative role in this ad.

The woman in figure 3, who demonstrates a similar subservient attitude towards the camera, stares at the camera and obeys the photographer's command to smile. The woman seems to have formed an attachment to her camera since she holds it close to her chest. She is not yet acquainted with the undeveloped pictures the camera holds, and she will become amazed only after her pictures are developed. Given Kodak's claim that its camera has 'removed most of the opportunities for making mistakes', the woman, no doubt, anticipates that her vision will be preserved. In essence, Kodak suggests that she can trust the moments of her life to the machine. The slogan 'Kodak keeps the story' was highly successful in this respect (see fig. 4). The company asserted that its cameras would function as storage devices to remember what the consumer would forget. The ability to remember certain moments with sentiment became intertwined with using the camera and viewing photographs. Marshall McLuhan's observation that 'the "content" of any medium blinds

us to the character of the medium'<sup>15</sup> seems to describe how the camera appeals to us and why we are emotionally attached to this device.



FIGURE 3: KODAK, 1908, ADVERTISEMENT, HARTMAN CENTER, DUKE UNIVERSITY.

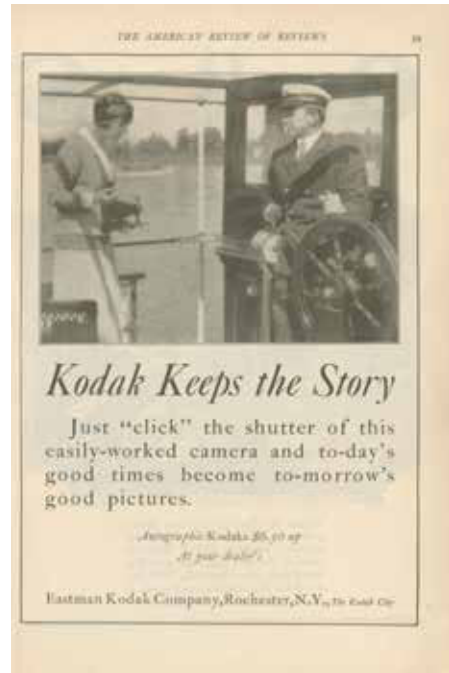


FIGURE 4: KODAK, C. 1910, ADVERTISEMENT, HARTMAN CENTER, DUKE UNIVERSITY.

In many of its ads, Kodak implies that the camera could enhance the quality of consumers' lives by allowing them to search for potential photographs. This activity was touted as a superb experience: 'Wherever the purr of your motor lures you, wherever the call of the road leads you, there you will find pictures, untaken pictures that invite your Kodak' (see fig. 5). It is difficult to dismiss the manmade elements Kodak chose to highlight in this advertisement: the motor, the road, and the camera. As if seducing their consumers with the new technologies of the day, Kodak then tells them, 'And you can take them'. By empowering its consumers to capture their surroundings, Kodak promotes the photographic moment as being achieved with ease. The woman in figure 5 demonstrates this attitude towards snapshot photography: she has set out in her car to capture images of the outside and does not remove herself from her vehicle. Everything appears to be a potential photograph, which she can take at her leisure.

15 | Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 9.

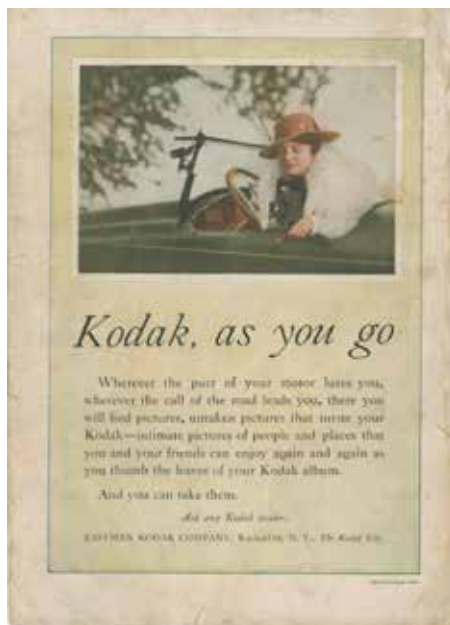


FIGURE 5: KODAK, 1917, ADVERTISEMENT, HARTMAN CENTER, DUKE UNIVERSITY.



FIGURE 6: KODAK, 'THE HALF-HOUR CALLED BOYHOOD', 1950S, ADVERTISEMENT, EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY.

Kodak placed a heavy emphasis upon the camera's ability to stop time (see fig. 6). In his essay 'Emotional Archives: Online Photo Sharing and the Cultivation of the Self', Daniel Palmer notes that Kodak was the first company to commodify moments.<sup>16</sup> For much of the 20th century, 'a Kodak moment' was a 'common expression to refer to any moment worth remembering'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, 'Kodak succeeded in commodifying the passing of time itself'.<sup>18</sup> The slogan 'The half-hour called boyhood' demonstrates Palmer's observation and also emphasizes the passing of time, which creates a sense of urgency. In essence, Kodak counseled consumers to anticipate moments that would be worth remembering by preparing for them: 'Keep your camera handy – with extra rolls of Kodak film – for all those fleeting pictures of your children and your happy times with them'. Kodak sold consumers the illusion of control by telling them that the camera could pause the ticking clock, or, rather, extend the clock through extra rolls of film.

In the mid- to late 20th century, Kodak produced a series of advertisements in which a model directly faced the viewer with a camera as if ready to snap the viewer's picture. By reversing the role of the consumer from spectator of a scene to the subject of an advertisement,

16 | Daniel Palmer, 'Emotional Archives: Online Photo Sharing and the Cultivation of the Self', *Photographies* (September, 2010): 156, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17540763.2010.499623#.UZHm4o530uo>.

17 | Palmer, 'Emotional Archives': 160.

18 | Palmer, 'Emotional Archives': 160.



Kodak placed the viewer in the model's position. This approach may imply that the viewer should capture what is directly in front of him or her. As the snapshot camera became more and more affordable, individual family members began to receive his or her own device.

In figure 7, Kodak advertised the camera as a device capable of building identity: 'They'll decide what to shoot. And they'll establish a concept of 'self', by recording their lives in pictures'. By positioning the camera as integral to self-development, Kodak turned receiving a camera into a rite of passage. This advertisement demonstrates how the snapshot camera became marketed as a device intended to serve the individual more than the family. In retrospect, Kodak's advertisements are disconcerting as we now find ourselves consumed with another mechanical companion: the smartphone. Via social media networks, it seems that the smartphone has become essential for building one's social circle and expressing his or her identity to others.



FIGURE 7: KODAK, 1980, ADVERTISEMENT, EASTMAN KODAK COMPANY.

Companies that advertise the smartphone as a camera seem to encourage the same ideas that Kodak promoted in its camera advertisements, such as the camera's ability to preserve time. 'Unlimited Data', the mobile-phone service Sprint's slogan, signifies the smartphone's ability to record moments in time as data. For avid smartphone users, unlimited data offers them the illusion that their smartphones will hold an endless amount of information and impose no restrictions on their usage. The smartphone, in this way, is a superior camera.

In a 2011 commercial titled *Unlimited*,<sup>19</sup> Sprint demonstrates the smartphone's superiority by displaying a counting mechanism that tracks and records the kilobytes, megabytes, and gigabytes of data used by the woman's smartphone as she goes about her daily activities. The smartphone that the woman holds in her hand appears to be her manager: it is with her morning, noon, and night. It organizes her routine, and she appears to withdraw from the world around her in favor of inhabiting the world of her smartphone. This commercial implies that her environment is a place she cannot trust – the life moving around her is inconsistent. For example, while she is walking her dog and looking at her phone, her dog on a leash runs away but she keeps hold of her phone. It seems that Sprint uses this scene to tell viewers that their smartphones are more reliable than their environments. Thus, consumers need data storage. Perhaps, Sprint wants viewers to believe that no matter how busy and unpredictable their lives may be, they will be able to trust their smartphones and Sprint's wireless network.

In December 2012, Sprint created one of the most intense smartphone commercials to date: it is rapid in pace and quick in its messaging.<sup>20</sup> By applying the notion of 'Unlimited Data' to photography, Sprint shifted the focus of its message from storing one's life as data to storing it through images. In this commercial, one can see how the former practice of taking photographs to *preserve* one's life has turned into taking photographs to *collect* one's life as images are taken compulsively, without aim or purpose. The actors in the commercial snap pictures as if they are under a magical spell of delight, as Sprint asks consumers to participate in building 'the gallery of humanity'. This commercial, less subtle about its intention to sway the consumer to use Sprint's service, makes grandiose statements such as, 'the miraculous is everywhere ... in our homes, in our minds'. Sprint then shows clips of impressive power grids and biological structures, which implies that new technology is the equivalent to human anatomy.

In the next scene, children snap pictures with their smartphones as if they are using their smartphones to chase fireflies. A scratchy 1970s color filter is quickly applied to and then removed from this segment of the commercial. This effect and the footage of the children seems to evoke childhood memories of an earlier time, which suggests to the viewer that it is nostalgic to take pictures. Older consumers watching this commercial may desire to go back to a time when they, themselves, could take pictures without a care in the world. As these children snap pictures, they do not capture precious memories. Instead, they turn their environment into redundant and digital data as part of their brief and fleeting childhoods.

In the next scene the narrator asks, 'So why would you cap that?' The cadence of his voice implies that it is an absurd notion to limit our ability to snap as many pictures as we desire, and Sprint overemphasizes the limitlessness of the smartphone. The viewer is then told, 'My iPhone 5 can see every point of view, every panorama, the entire gallery of humanity. I need to upload all of me. I need, no, I have the right to be unlimited'. The camera zooms out from above the actor who holds a phone in his hand and looks directly up into the sky as the vantage point leaves Earth. This visual effect implies that through the use of the

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19 | *Unlimited*, Sprint, 4 November 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TW9NnaB0Rfs>.

20 | *Be Unlimited*, Sprint, 2012, <http://www.ispot.tv/ad/7AUE/sprint-be-unlimited>.

iPhone, users can become infinite and exist in a realm that is beyond human understanding and, indeed, divine.

In comparison to Kodak's advertisements, Sprint forcefully suggests that the smartphone is essential for maximizing our lives and also suggests that we should take pictures out of entitlement rather than necessity. As Sprint makes no distinction between important moments and everyday activities, the company appears to disregard the notion of selectivity. Actors in this commercial demonstrate how to reproduce and share moments without purpose, and the viewer is unable to distinguish the difference between preserving moments and accumulating data.

In a 2013 iPhone 5 commercial,<sup>21</sup> Apple takes a different approach to marketing the iPhone as a camera and shows actors using the iPhone in vernacular scenes. This commercial has a calmer tone than Sprint's commercial, and a light and merry piano melody plays while scenes transition. In the opening scene, one actor runs in a towering wheat field and uses an iPhone to capture another actor who runs ahead. The scenes in this commercial transition at a moderate pace and make one feel privy to these actors' personal moments. As the commercial progresses, Apple shows the iPhone being used in many situations as a camera. In every frame, the iPhone is held in front of the actor's face, replacing his or her vision – and, therefore, also replacing his or her memory with mediated experience.

The viewer of this commercial may begin to realize that the pictures the actors are snapping are not for remembering but for viewing on a digital platform. People are racing through their surroundings, rushing to the next place, quickly snapping pictures, not for observation or contemplation of the present, but for later. In one scene, a man who is running seems to be building a virtual collection of his environment. As he does not disrupt his exercise to photograph the landscape he passes by, he photographs it while in motion. Whether or not these pictures will be viewed in the future is uncertain. This commercial seems to encourage consumers to take pictures to remember what their subjects looked like rather than to experience their subjects firsthand. The actors do not exhibit behaviors associated with reflection, attention, or observation. This practice raises concern because, as Paul Virilio observes, 'these new perceptions come at a cost: the loss of a part of the field of perception, since augmented reality is nothing more than accelerated reality'.<sup>22</sup> These actors accelerate their everyday activities so that they may contribute to their social networks. Billions of images reside on Instagram – but do we *improve* by taking and uploading these pictures? Does our experience become better as it is mediated?

The Narrative Clip is a new capture device that echoes Virilio's observation. This photo clip is a small, wearable, and GPS-enabled camera that automatically snaps pictures of a user's environment.<sup>23</sup> The invention of this camera may imply that new capture technology intends to replace and disregard personal perception. The clip-on camera, reminiscent of a digital parasite, collects its host's environment as a secondhand source. Although Instagram users have more control over their images, it seems as though tech developers

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21 | *Photos Every Day*, Apple, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZGzXEEXZcc>.

22 | Paul Virilio, *The Administration of Fear*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012, p. 39.

23 | 'Narrative Clip', *Narrative*, <http://getnarrative.com/?sid=8528cf41ddf4bf601c5fd895584c5c6>.

push users to desire secondhand information about themselves and their environments. Under the digital and social conditions of photography, secondhand perception is extolled as essential to orienting oneself in the world.

It seems as though Kodak greatly influenced how we understand our being-in-the-world by communicating to us that it is possible to achieve self-perfection with the press of a button. Smartphone companies contemporized Kodak's messages to convince us that we can become better versions of ourselves through self-quantification and image-sharing. We use social networks to elevate ourselves, and Instagram helps us to position selfies as the center of our universes. We do not question when to take pictures because every moment is a potential photograph to us. We live in tandem with images – and our selfies.

# Fascination: My Self, My Selfie, and My Network

*We are here confronted with what we can but call the vertigo of a love with no object other than a mirage.*

- JULIA KRISTEVA, 'NARCISSUS: THE NEW INSANITY'

It is now perhaps second nature to pose and take pictures of oneself and to post them on Instagram. Many users snap numerous self-portraits as though on automatic pilot, similar to what Marshall McLuhan calls the 'Narcissus role of subliminal awareness'<sup>24</sup> in his 1964 essay 'The Gadget Lover'. *Narcissus*, he reminds us, means numbness, which results from viewing one's reflection as a form of misrecognition.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the common understanding of the Narcissus myth, McLuhan observes that Narcissus did not *fall in love with himself*; rather, he was *numb to his image* and could not recognize his reflection as his own. Narcissus thought his image was that of *another*. For example, when we unexpectedly encounter ourselves in a mirror, we can be jarred by the figure that confronts us. In this brief moment of confusion and shock, our reflection appears to be familiar and unfamiliar, perhaps even otherworldly. Shortly after, however, we realize the image to be our own. Narcissus, McLuhan tells us, did not have this realization.

It is precisely this misrecognition, we could argue, that allows people to be attracted to themselves and to want to catch and view their image repeatedly. McLuhan's reframing of the Narcissus myth demonstrates that 'men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves'. His observation can be seen on Instagram, whose filter and hashtag functions provide users with the ability to customize their images – to become even more fascinated with themselves – while also increasing the chances for misrecognition. Users create many digital selves with many different looks, compulsively abstracting their appearance as if compelled by an external force. McLuhan recognizes this force when he observes that Narcissus became a 'servomechanism' to his reflection, a servant to his own image, as if it were the only other person that existed in the world.<sup>26</sup>

It is as if Instagram has designed a platform that perpetually tempts and traps us, relying on our inherent fascinations with ourselves to lure us to our selfies and, thus, the program. Moreover, the two processes that McLuhan describes as self-amputation (numbing oneself) and self-amplification (extending oneself), which occur while people gaze upon their images, prolong their engagements with selfies. For Narcissus, gazing at his reflection acted as a counter-irritant to the stresses and pressures in his environment.<sup>27</sup> And McLuhan tells us, 'self-amputation forbids self-recognition'.<sup>28</sup> Users' images become magnified, and the intensity of this relationship isolates them and their images from their

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24 | McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 46.

25 | McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 41.

26 | McLuhan explains that the nymph Echo tried to 'win [Narcissus'] love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain'.

27 | McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 43.

28 | McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 43.

environments. To illustrate this, McLuhan describes consuming alcohol as making one feel desensitized, yet, at the same time, intensified.<sup>29</sup>

Per McLuhan, ‘the selection of a *single* sense for intense stimulus, or of a single extended, isolated, or “amputated” sense in technology, is in part the reason for the numbing effect that technology as such has on its makers and users’.<sup>30</sup> It is probable that the activity of taking and viewing multiple selfies is, unbeknownst to us, our ‘attempt to maintain equilibrium’ by finding ‘pleasure’ and ‘comfort’ in our images.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the hashtag function allows us to increase our presence on Instagram, which, in turn, enables us to increase our experience of feeling larger than life. We perpetuate a never-ending cycle of images, which suggests that we frequently experience numbness and amplification while taking and viewing selfies.

Narcissus, as we know, ignored the world around him and, once he realized the limitations of the water, paid a price for feeling artificially limitless.<sup>32</sup> Since Instagram travels with us as, we have more opportunities than Narcissus had to become mesmerized by our image. Moreover, Instagram is designed to motivate other people to ‘like’ and comment on selfies. This activity, in and of itself, appears to have awakened the long-forgotten dream of Narcissus by enabling images to communicate back to their creators.

For instance, each comment and ‘like’ that is posted to a user’s image by someone else can be sent as a notification to a user’s smartphone.<sup>33</sup> A user can view a notification immediately and continue to interact with his or her selfie. The selfie, the focus of the dialogue, accumulates unpredictable likes and comments as if it is magically socializing with its user. Thus, the user can become engaged in a conversation between his or her self, selfie, and social network.

As demonstrated by the selection of scottisaacks’ selfies,<sup>34</sup> images begin to create a conversation with one another based on proximity (see figs. 8 through 11).<sup>35</sup> As if creating messages to him, his selfies begin to function as a form of self-reassurance. Judging by the blank stares in the images, he seems to receive relief from taking these kinds of pictures. When he announces that he is going job hunting and must cut his hair, it is as if he is searching for sympathy from his followers and using his images to process, or cope with, the changes he must make to himself. He seems to rely on these images as they provide

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29 | McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 43.

30 | McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 44.

31 | McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, pp. 42-43.

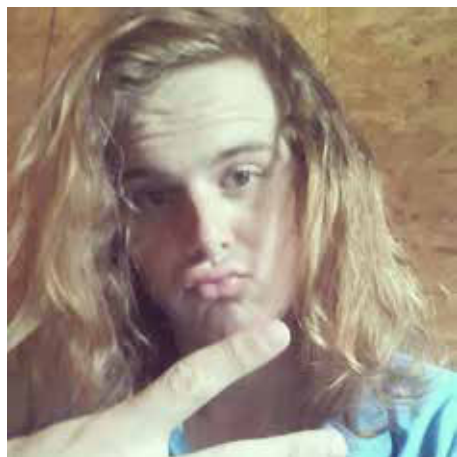
32 | In Ovid’s version of the Narcissus myth, the youth took his own life once he realized he could not be with this image, and his remains transformed into the narcissus flower.

33 | Saeideh Bakhshi, et al., ‘Faces Engage Us: Photos with Faces Attract More Likes and Comments on Instagram’, *Georgia Tech and Yahoo Labs*, (May, 2014): 1, <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~sbakhshi/faces2014-bakhshi.pdf>. In this study, researchers note that ‘photos with faces are 38% more likely to receive likes and 32% more likely to receive comments’ from other users.

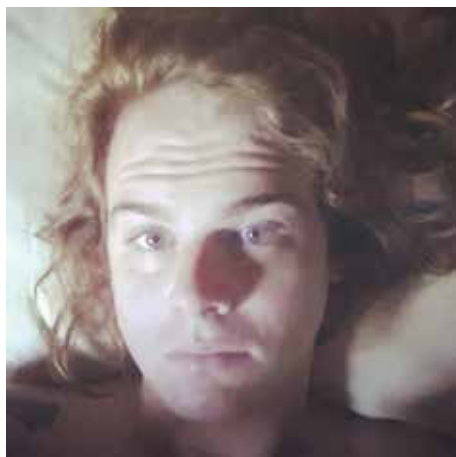
34 | The user images that appear in figures 8-11 are samples from this user’s profile. These images are meant to illustrate the relationship that develops between the user, his images, and his profile on Instagram.

35 | As the titles, captions, and hashtags of user images can be longer than average titles, full image citations are listed on pages 46-47. User images’ time stamps appear in Pacific Daylight Time (PDT).

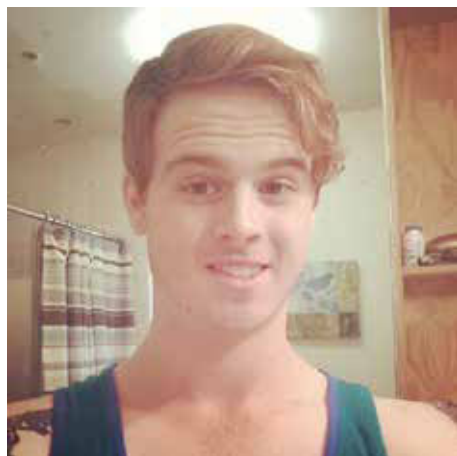
comfort that he might otherwise have sought from another. User *scottisaacks* produces several selfies each month, which suggests that taking selfies is a habit-forming activity.



**FIGURE 8:** SCOTTISAACKS, 'IF YOU DON'T COME SEE ...', 1:40 PM, 10 JUNE 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, SCOTTISAACKS.



**FIGURE 9:** SCOTTISAACKS, 'I'M CURRENTLY DOING INTERVIEWS ...', 6:41 AM, 17 JUNE 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, SCOTTISAACKS.



**FIGURE 10:** SCOTTISAACKS, 'I NEEDED A NEW PROFILE PICTURE ...', 6:41 AM, 17 JUNE 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, SCOTTISAACKS.



**FIGURE 11:** SCOTTISAACKS, 'KIK ME: SCOTTISAACKS ...', 1:25 PM, 22 JUNE 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, SCOTTISAACKS.

User *idkmybffdill* has created a series of selfies that appear to keep him engrossed with himself, as his selfies have established a before-and-after pattern. For example, in an untitled image, *idkmybffdill* takes a photo of himself and centers his head in the middle of the frame.<sup>36</sup> He directs his eyes down toward his camera phone while raising his left

36 | *idkmybffdill*, 8:00 AM, 17 July 2013, [http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php~ /detail/502085336192024869\\_23737591](http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php~ /detail/502085336192024869_23737591).

eyebrow. His lips are puckered as if he is about to inhale from the pipe that he holds in his hand. His face dominates the image frame, consuming the viewer's attention. A minute later, he uploads an image of his face concealed by a cloud of grainy, blue smoke.<sup>37</sup> Only the upper outline of his head is revealed, which creates a slightly menacing quality. He adds a cool-toned filter, possibly to illustrate that he is mysterious. He appears to be playing an electronic game of hide-and-seek with himself and his camera phone.

The images on idkmybffdill's profile become more unusual. In one image, he appears to be sleeping in a bathtub and in another to be resting on a sofa.<sup>38</sup> When using a camera phone to take a selfie, most people outstretch an arm to take a picture, which can also be seen in the image itself. Since we cannot see idkmybffdill's outstretched arm in his pictures, it is possible that a friend took both of these images.<sup>39</sup> The caption of his selfie in which he is sleeping in a bathtub thanks his friends for making his 'twenty-first birthday a success'. The image of himself resting on a sofa appears to have been taken the following morning or afternoon. Even though this user may have not taken these photos, it appears that he uploaded these images to his profile, thirteen hours apart, and stylized them to his liking. It is possible that these images serve two different functions. First, they appear to act as a visual form of gratitude towards his friends as he uses his selfies to demonstrate his exhaustion from the activities that occurred on and after his birthday. Second, these images appear to act as a means to fascinate him, as he has uploaded images of himself with his eyes closed. This may indicate that he is interested in interacting with his unfamiliar self, one that only the camera is capable of showing him. In this way, his friends' comments help to animate these ungraspable versions of himself.

User idkmybffdill continues his before-and-after motif by taking pictures of himself before and while he is at work. The compositions of idkmybffdill's before-work and while-at-work images are almost identical; however, his facial expressions appear to communicate different moods in each image. In one of his before-work images, idkmybffdill appears to be in a bathroom.<sup>40</sup> He stands in front of a mirror with a relaxed facial expression. He looks down at his smartphone, as if he is bored. The bathroom door is closed, and it appears that he desires privacy; however, he takes a selfie and captions it 'Ootd' (outfit of the day) and shares this image with his social network. The next day, he stands in front of his bathroom mirror and holds his phone in front of his chest with confidence.<sup>41</sup> He is wearing a collared shirt, vest, and tie, and he has a new haircut. The bathroom door is open behind him, which suggests that he is prepared to start his day; he affirms this notion to his network and himself by snapping a picture.

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37 | idkmybffdill, 8:01 AM, 17 July 2013, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/502085746604671283\\_23737591](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/502085746604671283_23737591).

38 | idkmybffdill, 'I'd say my 21st was a success. Thanks guys. (r)', 12:51 AM, 14 July 2013, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/499694949745853130\\_23737591](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/499694949745853130_23737591); idkmybffdill, '@tucker240sx got me', 1:54 PM, 14 July 2013, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/500088701249422035\\_23737591](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/500088701249422035_23737591).

39 | If users engage with images of themselves as if they captured them from their smartphones, I consider these images to fall under the category of selfies since users can personalize their images by adding filters, hashtags, and captions, as well as upload these images to their user profiles.

40 | idkmybffdill, 'Ootd. Lolololol', 5:13 AM, 26 June 2013, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/486780626006474791\\_23737591](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/486780626006474791_23737591).

41 | idkmybffdill, 'On dat work flow', 4:59 AM, 27 June 2013, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/487498391940006107\\_23737591](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/487498391940006107_23737591).



In idkmybffdill's while-at-work selfies, his face fills the frame and he bears two different and amusing expressions. Following the image in which he appears to be bored in his bathroom, he snaps a picture of himself at work while he is wearing a headset and headphones, one on each ear, and looks to be imitating a pilot.<sup>42</sup> A co-worker who is captured in the background appears to be his passenger. Although idkmybffdill's caption, 'Work selfie. With Joey creepin in the background', implies that his co-worker is invading his selfie, it seems as though his co-worker did not choose to be in it. The next day, when idkmybffdill appears to be more confident, he takes a picture of himself while-at-work and uses his shoulders to fill the image frame, drinks out of a cup to make his image more active, and blocks our view of the passersby behind him.<sup>43</sup> He makes direct eye contact with the viewer and raises both of his eyebrows, as if to solicit attention from his Instagram network.

User idkmybffdill's selfies suggest that taking snapshots of himself is a way for him to control *how his time* is spent when he is at work. It seems to be a common practice for us to take selfies at work. Perhaps visiting these images provides us with a welcomed distraction throughout the day, as if a sympathetic friend has accompanied us to work. This practice, integrated into our everyday routine, becomes a ritual, and when we assume similar poses in selfies, this ritual-like aspect is reinforced.

Several of \_janamac's selfies suggest that she also takes selfies in order to control her time.<sup>44</sup> Almost once a month, she ritually takes a selfie in her car. It seems as though she is isolating herself even more by taking her picture in an already confined space. Although photographed from slightly different angles, the view of the car in the background is similar, as each image includes a view of a window, seatbelt, and gray interior. Her expression and clothing change in each image but the car's interior creates a feeling of remoteness even though she makes direct eye contact with the viewer. It is difficult to determine if she is interacting with her smartphone to take selfies or using her smartphone to interact with herself. Her gaze and position in the image frame seem too precise for her not to be using her smartphone's real-time viewing option before she takes her picture. The intensity in her eyes indicates a certain level of intimacy she has with her smartphone's screen, and it appears as though this activity is a means for her to become intimate with her reflection.

One could say that the real-time viewing option on the smartphone screen has altered the process of taking a self-portrait. Edward Weston's counsel to '*see photographically*'<sup>45</sup> seems no longer to pertain to photography as the camera enables us to view and share images in real-time. The methods for creating photos on Instagram have drastically changed former notions about photography, as we – not only in our selfies but also in other photos – appear to rely on smartphone screens rather than ourselves to compose photos. Although Weston does not specifically refer to self-portraiture in his essay, he explains that

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42 | idkmybffdill, 'Work selfie. With Joey creepin in the background', 4:05 PM, 26 June 2013, [http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php/detail/487109033256845351\\_23737591](http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php/detail/487109033256845351_23737591).

43 | idkmybffdill, 10:01 AM, 27 June 2013, [http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php/~detail/487650632944615681\\_23737591](http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php/~detail/487650632944615681_23737591).

44 | '\_janamac', *Iconosquare*, <http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php/~user/29888631/>.

45 | Edward Weston, 'Seeing Photographically', in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg, New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980, p. 173.

composition, camera angle, depth of field, exposure time, film development, and other elements play a significant role in the final look of a photograph.<sup>46</sup> It is possible that we do not contemplate how to capture our likeness in another medium or pre-visualize our image before capture. When we pose ourselves according to how we see ourselves on screens or in reflective surfaces, we take a less active role in composing our digital self-portraits. It could be said that we see ourselves in terms of how we are represented in the program.

When taking a selfie, the subject usually holds a smartphone in hand; this does not allow the subject to create a great range of distance between his or her self and the smartphone's camera. Most people look at themselves on screens or in mirrors, placing themselves once again in the position of Narcissus. This position seems to be encouraged by those who develop new technologies. For example, iStrategyLabs created a mirror called 'Self Enhancing Live Feed Image Engine' that takes a picture of a user and then uploads his or her image to Twitter. This technology enables the user, his image, and his network to become integrated into a single digital image on the surface; however, this capability leaves little room for *reflection*.

In 'Narcissus: The New Insanity', French theorist Julia Kristeva explains that Narcissus' 'condemnation has no bearing on the origin of the reflection process',<sup>47</sup> which is to say that Narcissus' self-numbing should not be mistaken for, or seen as equivalent to, self-reflection. Plotinus, she notes, warned that in this way, 'the error would simply set in at the moment when the individual being grants reality to such images instead of examining his own intimacy'.<sup>48</sup> It appears that Instagram and other social media networks are conditioning users to look at themselves as surface objects, rather than encouraging them to engage in meaningful self-reflection. Instagram's extraordinarily efficient and simple program has greatly shortened the time needed to create a self-portrait and the space needed for self-reflection that previous photographic processes could facilitate before or after capture. The selfie, under these circumstances, seems to be absent of self-contemplation – but, perhaps, the selfie simply expresses our individual desires to us, which makes this particular image all that matters to us.

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46 | Weston, 'Seeing Photographically', pp. 172-173.

47 | Julia Kristeva, 'Narcissus: The New Insanity', in *Tales of Love*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, p. 106.

48 | Kristeva, 'Narcissus', p. 106.

# Aesthetic: The Filter Function and Identity

*The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.*

- ANDRÉ BAZIN, 'THE ONTOLOGY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE'

Instagram's image filters can be applied to images to create a variety of visual effects. People select from a series of filter icons that represent various styles of analog photography to transform the appearance of their pictures, and many of these filters artificially age images. Journalist Kate Knibbs notes that image filters have altered about half of the images on Instagram.<sup>49</sup>

In their 2012 study, visual culture critics Lisa Chandler and Debra Livingston examine digital photography's merger with encoded film effects on Instagram: 'visual signs of memory, age, time, place, medium and substrate can be combined to generate a simulacrum of analogue authenticity, allowing the creator to feel that they have produced something distinctive through the image's creative imprecision'.<sup>50</sup> For example, the filter function can easily alter a photo's lighting and color to mimic Polaroid, black-and-white, Kodachrome, and other types of film. The simulated authenticity that the filter function generates appears to take visual precedence over the content of the user's selfie. Since the filter function is applied in post-production, it ultimately changes the look of the user's selfie – perhaps this was not the user's original intention. Nevertheless, the selfie and its aesthetics are not considered simultaneously before capture, which means that the user may not preconceive how he or she wants to look in his or her selfie before and after capture.

Many people are encouraged to rely upon the post-production process rather than the initial capture process itself. Instagram filters radically change the lighting, color, and contrast of the image, which alters the meaning of the original image. Flusser's essay 'The Codified World' illuminates the challenges of interpreting the filter function, as he explained, 'we are programmed by colors'.<sup>51</sup> He notes that colors surround us and communicate messages to us, such as the red and green traffic light signals that instruct us to stop or go.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, he explains, 'if a significant number of the messages programmed for us appear in color, it means that surfaces have become important as carriers of mes-

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49 | Kate Knibbs, 'Are You an Instagram Wizard or Wannabe? Your Favorite Filters are More Revealing Than You Think', *Digitaltrends.com*, 19 March 2013, <http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/are-you-an-instagram-wizard-or-wannabe-your-favorite-filters-are-more-revealing-than-you-think/>.

50 | Lisa Chandler and Debra Livingston, 'Reframing the Authentic: Photography, Mobile Technologies and the Visual Language of Digital Imperfection', *inter-disciplinary.net* (May, 2012): 1, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/at-the-interface/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/chandlerlvpaper.pdf>.

51 | Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p. 35.

52 | Flusser, *Writings*, p. 35.

sages'.<sup>53</sup> It is possible that filtered images absorb unintended meanings from former, unrelated epochs of photography by borrowing their color palettes. Certain filters imitate physical signifiers of age by generating digitized dust, fading or scratch marks on top of images.<sup>54</sup> These types of effects replicate the physicality of old photographs and convince users that their filtered images have earned the *weight* of time.<sup>55</sup> This instant faux gravitas implants visual signifiers from photography's history into contemporary images but creates no dialogue with the past. The filter function repurposes the past to encourage users to generate digital praise about other users' images in the present.

People generally use the filter function to adorn an image with intense or desaturated color, and it seems as though they do not use the filter function to reference a moment in history but only borrow an older photograph's aesthetic appeal. Without further examination, the messages that filters embed into our images will accumulate, and it will become impossible to decipher them. If 'photographs remain undecoded', Flusser warned, 'they accomplish their task perfectly: programming society to act as though under a magic spell for the benefit of cameras'.<sup>56</sup> Those who compulsively produce selfies seem to have fallen under this spell and search for an ideal self by combining images of themselves with various filters that mimic film photography's appearance. It is as if they look for the perfect self in each decade of the 20th century.

Some Instagram users' self-portrait practices seem similar to the activities of the 'TV spectator' described by Flusser in 1973. He observed that the TV spectator creates his own programs by combining his footage with other TV programs. As he controls the 'beginning, middle, and end of the program', he can 'play any role in the program he desires'.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Instagram users appear to desire to control their positions in time through their selfies. With regard to the TV spectator, Flusser notes, 'although he acts in history and is determined by history, he is no longer interested in history as such, but in the possibility of combining various histories'.<sup>58</sup> Flusser describes this activity as a game, and some Instagram users appear to be consumed with combining various histories into their self-portraits to idealize themselves.

This type of user behavior is comparable to 19th-century sociologist Georg Simmel's observations about people and adornment. Although Simmel describes adornment as an 'object of considerable value',<sup>59</sup> such as jewelry, the filter function seems to be a virtual and commodified version of adornment: it is an immaterial embellishment that enables the user to '*distinguish* himself [or herself] before others, and to be the object of an attention that others do not receive'.<sup>60</sup> The visual effects of an Instagram filter, such as a digi-

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53 | Flusser, *Writings*, p. 35.

54 | Chandler and Livingston, 'Reframing the Authentic', p. 4.

55 | Crouch, 'Instagram's Instant Nostalgia'.

56 | Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy*, p. 48.

57 | Flusser, *Writings*, pp. 32-33.

58 | Flusser, *Writings*, p. 33.

59 | Georg Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, London: Sage Publications, 1997, p. 207.

60 | Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, p. 206.

tized light burst, ‘intensifies or enlarges the impression of the personality by operating as a sort of radiation emanating from it’.<sup>61</sup> ‘Likes’ act as compliments, and users’ selfies become gifts to their networks and also provide them with personal validation.

For instance, user *rany\_fernandes*’ profile hosts hundreds of pictures of her.<sup>62</sup> She stylizes her images with black-and-white, Polaroid, or blue-toned filters. Usually, she smiles or pouts her lips. Sometimes she will scrunch her face or cast her eyes downward and look away from the viewer. She takes her picture from various angles to create movement in her images, and she arranges her long hair to frame her face. Based on the number of selfies that appear on her profile, one might question if *rany\_fernandes* takes pictures as acts of vanity. Or, perhaps without awareness, she takes selfies to preserve herself as a photographic truth and to share her existence with others. The various Instagram filters that she has applied to her images lack visual consistency, which make it difficult to interpret the purposes and messages of her selfies.

For example, some of her images are hazy or saturated with bursts of light, and she as a person – as an identity – is inconsistent via repetition and aesthetics. User *rany\_fernandes* doesn’t use the filter function to reference a specific period in time in her selfies, but rather she references almost all styles of film photography. She gives the impression that she desires to control her position in time as she becomes endless through the sheer repetition of herself on her Instagram profile. Moreover, *rany\_fernandes* sometimes looks unlike herself, as her selfies vary in style, mood, and composition. Much like *scottisaacks*’ selfies, her selfies begin to form a dialogue with each other. Since her filtered selfies simulate the look of different decades, *rany\_fernandes*’ selfies appear to communicate messages to her from long-forgotten and fabricated pasts.

A filtered selfie could be interpreted as akin to Flusser’s definition of simulation: an ‘imitation that exaggerates a few aspects of the original while disregarding all the other aspects’.<sup>63</sup> Since *rany\_fernandes* uses the filter function to exaggerate or intensify her features, she replaces her contemporary presence with colors from other photographic periods. Thus, the filter function has the ability to disregard the appearance of her physical features and time-specific signifiers that are essential to her identity. Several journalists and scholars have suggested that the popularity of Instagram’s filter function can be attributed to nostalgia. Sociologist Nathan Jurgenson calls this ‘nostalgia for the present’ and argues that the content of an image can obtain emotional and sentimental value in the present by borrowing aesthetics from the past.<sup>64</sup> He notes, it is ‘an attempt to make our photos seem more important, substantial and real’.<sup>65</sup> Although Jurgenson’s theory explains a certain appeal of the filter function, it seems as though a deeper desire motivates us to apply filters to selfies.

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61 | Simmel, *Simmel on Culture*, p. 206.

62 | ‘*rany\_fernandes*’, *Iconosquare*, <http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php#/user/294020548/>.

63 | Vilém Flusser, ‘On Memory (Electronic or Otherwise)’, *Leonardo*, (1990): 397.

64 | Nathan Jurgenson, ‘The Faux-Vintage Photo: Full Essay (Parts I, II, and III)’, *The Society Pages*, 14 May 2011, <http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/05/14/the-faux-vintage-photo-full-essay-parts-i-ii-and-iii/>.

65 | Nathan Jurgenson, ‘The Faux-Vintage Photo’.

In 'The Age of Affluence', Steven Keller's introductory essay to Jim Heimann's *Mid-Century Ads*, he observes that in 1950s advertisements nostalgia 'provides a soft landing from the fears of extinction' and 'serves as a mental safety net' for consumers.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, nostalgia 'triggered desires that provoked consumerism'.<sup>67</sup> On Instagram, the ability to apply the look of nostalgia to selfies provokes us to reproduce and self-consume our images, as if to ensure that the product of ourselves will not run out. 'What better lifeline to throw a drowning soul', Keller says of 1950s marketing efforts, 'than the progressive illusions produced by vintage advertisements'.<sup>68</sup> Possibly, we apply nostalgic aesthetics to our selfies to distract ourselves from the inevitability of extinction. In this way, Instagram seems to promise electronic immortality.

Instagram allows us to dissociate ourselves from time when we use the filter function, and thus we dissociate ourselves from the reality of death. The immaterial and artificially aged image could communicate survival to us rather than demise, as we see ourselves as persons from long ago. Filtered images could also give us the impression that we have cheated death since we view the aging process in real-time. Paradoxically, the filter function also encourages McLuhan's theory of misrecognition since it takes us longer to recognize ourselves in our selfies. The filter, it seems, adds another feature for us to use to self-numb and self-amplify.

User andreetro has taken a selfie in the seat of a car and applied a black-and-white filter and digitized film grain to her image.<sup>69</sup> The right side of her face is lit with a haze of sunlight that shines through the car's window. Her hair is in a loose and casual updo and pieces of her long and wavy bangs fall gently to the left side of her face. Her lips are slightly parted and she has a soft expression on her face; she wears large, dark sunglasses. The presence of the sunglasses in her selfie suggests that she desires distance. She shields her eyes from the viewer and, possibly, herself to make her image less intimate. Although she has placed herself in the public eye via her social network, she guards herself. Similar to the mood of \_janamac's selfies, andreetro has created an isolated and cold mood in her selfie by taking her picture in a car. The black-and-white filter adds to this effect as colors that would communicate warmth to the viewer, such as yellow from sunlight, have been replaced with grayscale. The interior of the car appears to be that of a newer model, while the filter she uses suggests that the image itself is from another time period. As an individual whose existence corresponds with a specific time period, her identity is in a perplexing state. She seems displaced as her selfie's aesthetics eject her from the present. The way in which this filter is applied to her image seems to function as an escape route from the present.

User zissisnikos' selfie has taken on a similar mood, as he has applied a black-and-white filter to his image.<sup>70</sup> A slanted neon sign lights the right side of his face, and he appears in

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66 | Jim Heimann, *Mid-Century Ads*, Köln: Taschen, 2012, p. 35.

67 | Heimann, *Mid-Century Ads*, p. 35.

68 | Heimann, *Mid-Century Ads*, p. 35.

69 | andreetro, 3:57 PM, 11 May 2014, [http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/718308228257773131\\_202890732](http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/718308228257773131_202890732).

70 | zissisnikos, '#cashmere #dream #hope #passion #nightlife #katerini #city #apanemic #party', 12:06 PM, 12 January 2014, [http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php-/detail/631973816791190391\\_329963057](http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php-/detail/631973816791190391_329963057).

the foreground of the image. He leaves about one-fourth of open space above his head in this image, which makes him appear short but modest. The depth of field in this image is significant in comparison to the average selfie, and one can see the lights behind him fade into the background. With a relaxed yet optimistic look on his face, zissisnikos looks as though he is beginning to smile as he stares directly at the viewer. His eye contact is intimate, and he seems to desire closeness; yet, the expression on his face is disconnected from the intensity of his eyes. If he views his image on his smartphone's screen in real-time, it would seem that he desires to know himself through his selfie. One may question if he and other users are beginning to generate images to look at themselves, as Gaston Bachelard described, '*as if they were already dead*',<sup>71</sup> in order to gain superior knowledge about themselves – a knowledge that they have yet to acquire in youth.

Instagram's filter function could be interpreted as an interactive and digital version of Bachelard's theory. In *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, he retells the story of a New Year's Eve celebration in which 18th-century German writer Jean-Paul Richter and a group of friends 'gathered around the pale flame of a punch bowl' and 'suddenly resolved to *look at one another as if they were already dead*'.<sup>72</sup> In doing so, these friends attempted to grasp each other's essence, as some people can only understand a person once he or she has passed away. It seems as though once one's life has come to an end that one's existence is finally revealed to loved ones.

Some people believe that the camera is capable of showing the true nature of a person in a photograph. We may wish to have a spiritual understanding about ourselves and look to our selfies to provide this insight to us. If we apply instantaneous and historic image filters to our selfies, we can look at ourselves as if we are no longer living. We may believe that we have acquired an otherworldly understanding about ourselves after we look at our selfies in this way. The physical passing of time is essential to understanding; however, automated film effects appear to be a ruse and lead us to believe that we have obtained this kind of understanding about ourselves instantaneously. This illusion limits our self-awareness and also our awareness of the world around us.

In 'The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs', Flusser explains that the 'discovery of silicon ensured humanity from demise, as an "aere perennius", something that might resist entropy better than bronze'.<sup>73</sup> Flusser predicted that the digital photograph would 'outlast the human species', and in the age of unlimited possibilities, his notion of immortality through the use of silicon is confirmed.<sup>74</sup> One can witness this phenomenon on many social networks. For example, friends and family who have passed away seemingly live forever on their user profiles, as though embalmed with data. Social networks continue to host profiles of the deceased as if they were still alive. One could even say that Instagram users create and carry their own virtual tombs or memorials.

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71 | Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, p. 87.

72 | Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, pp. 87-88.

73 | Vilém Flusser, 'The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object: An Essay on the Ontological Standing of Photographs', *Leonardo*, (1986): 331.

74 | Flusser, 'The Photograph as Post-Industrial Object'.

These digital tombs should not be thought of as unchanging. In his essay 'Photography and the Fetish', Christian Metz states that contrary to film, photography, 'by virtue of the objective suggestions of its signifier (stillness, again) maintains the memory of the dead *as being dead*'.<sup>75</sup> Film, on the other hand, captures a person in motion, and thus the deceased is seen as alive and animated. With the addition of film to Instagram's platform, photographs and films of the living and of the dead will occupy this social network, and it will become increasingly difficult to distinguish between them. Since self-portraits – both photographs and films – can be made to look as if they are from any time during the history of photography, and thus do not necessarily reflect the time period of their creation, they therefore cannot reliably signify the passing of time. In this respect, time no longer has bearing on Instagram; a user self-portrait becomes a-historical and loses an integral component of the subject's identity. As though uninterested in acknowledging themselves-in-their-time, users create different identities by borrowing them from the past. Their presence merges with notions of the past and dulls their essence in the present. As the present becomes secondary in selfies, it appears that aesthetics are prioritized over identity.

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75 | Christian Metz, 'Photography and Fetish', in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells, New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 141.



# Dissemination: The Hashtag Function and Identity

*The 'private life' is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object. It is my political right to be a subject which I must protect.*

- ROLAND BARTHES, 'HE WHO IS PHOTOGRAPHED'

In a 2013 study, media scholars Rubinstein and Sluis explored the relationship between metadata and images on the Internet, describing metadata as having the 'ability to append linguistic signs to an image (or other data object), to facilitate its classification, archiving, retrieval and indicate provenance (authorship, ownership, conditions of use)'.<sup>76</sup> As a form of metadata, the hashtag (#) on Instagram is a tool that allows people to assign words or short phrases to their images and browse for other images. Currently, the most popular hashtags on Instagram are 'love', 'instagood', and 'me'; 'selfie' is the 20th most popular hashtag.<sup>77</sup>

On Instagram, #selfie assumes several different meanings: it can function as a type of image, as an action, or as a self-referential pronoun. #selfie also functions as a type of self-categorization and it appears to confirm users' identities to themselves, as if they have forgotten, or will forget, that their images are their own. But #selfie only refers to the user when he or she is viewing his or her profile image page. Once a user's selfie is aggregated to Instagram's larger image network, it becomes part of a #selfie group.

In a 2012 study about the Twitter hashtag, researchers observed that the 'community role of a hashtag presents in its functionalities to *identify* a community, *form* a community, and allow users to *join* a community'.<sup>78</sup> In addition, these researchers suggested that a 'hashtag serves as both a tag of content and a symbol of membership of a community'.<sup>79</sup> Hashtags can also operate as independent of the #selfie community. Some Instagram users may not intend for their images to act as equal contributions to the #selfie community if users hashtag their images to promote themselves, as the hashtags 'follow', 'like', and 'tagforlikes' imply.

The process of assigning hashtags to selfies is more calculated for some users than for others. In their 2008 analysis of Flickr's tagging system, Rubinstein and Sluis recognized that the 'practice of tagging becomes part of a strategy for self-promotion that allows the individual to rise above the anonymity of most users'.<sup>80</sup> Social media critic Kris Holt illustrates Rubinstein and Sluis' observation, as he notes that the hashtag 'instagood' is a way for users to 'boost their like and comment numbers' and increase the likelihood that other users will

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76 | Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, 'Notes on the Margins of Metadata', *Photographies* (June, 2013): 151, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17540763.2013.788848#preview>.

77 | 'Top HashTags on Instagram', *Hashtagig*, May 2014, <http://www.hashtagig.com/top-hashtags-on-instagram.php>.

78 | Lei Yang, Tao Sun, Ming Zhang, and Qiaozhu Mei, 'We Know What @You #Tag: Does the Dual Role Affect Hashtag Adoption?', *University of Michigan*, (2012): 2, <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~qmei/pub/www2012-yang.pdf>.

79 | Yang, 'We Know What @You #Tag': 10.

80 | Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, 'A Life More Photographic', *Photographies* (March, 2008): 19, [http://www.academia.edu/181997/A\\_life\\_more\\_photographic\\_mapping\\_the\\_networked\\_image](http://www.academia.edu/181997/A_life_more_photographic_mapping_the_networked_image).

see their images.<sup>81</sup> In keeping with McLuhan's reframing of the Narcissus myth, hashtags allow users to self-amplify on a larger scale. Users who attach popular hashtags such as #instagood, #iphoneonly, or #like, for example, seem to want to stand out from the group. These users extend themselves beyond their personal networks and purposefully aggregate their selfies to specific Instagram feeds. In some ways, users' identities become defined by the *locations* where their selfies are aggregated to and by the *frequency* with which their selfies are produced. Users who maintain a presence on this platform quickly become fascinated by the promise of pluripotentiality: they create numerous images of themselves and assign numerous hashtags to their images to distribute them to theoretically unlimited locations. For these users, ubiquity, in and of itself, is a mark of distinction.

Although a user may perceive his or her images as distinct, images with hashtag pronouns such as 'me', 'I', and 'self' are collected into larger pools that display many different, unrelated selves. Singular words such as 'me', 'I', and 'self' become plural to represent the Instagram collective rather than the individual user. Instagram researcher Alise Tifentale notes that '#me becomes part of #us';<sup>82</sup> however, some users may not realize that they contribute to a group identity when they refer to themselves via hashtags. This is to be expected since, as Rubinstein and Sluis point out, 'users are in essence describing their photographs in a way that the computer can understand'.<sup>83</sup> Users appear to be encouraged to describe themselves in a way that will produce a following or continue a trend. In fact, 'a hashtag that is not picked up by more than one user [...] will most likely be considered a failure by computer scientists'.<sup>84</sup> One can assume this is true, given that data sample is needed to produce a valid analysis. It appears as though Instagram's program deprives users of their individuality when they refer to themselves via hashtags.

User lilyelixirmakeup has assigned the following hashtags to her image: '#makeupartist', '#makeup', '#soft\_makeup', '#daytime\_makeup', '#selfie', '#natural\_browns', '#natural', '#maquiagem', and '#natural'.<sup>85</sup> She has indicated on her profile page that she is a make-up artist by trade, and her selfie appears to function as an advertisement for her skill set but also as a personal image of herself. In her selfie, she is slightly off-center and her right cheek is turned towards the background. Her hair is pulled back, and she wears diamond earrings that are similar to the shape of a flower with many petals. Her make-up is flawless, as some of her hashtags imply. The background of her selfie is dark and out of focus. She is in the foreground and appears to be lit by a golden spotlight. This effect gives her an ethereal quality. Her gaze is direct but soft. Her presence is strong and captivating, and she is elegant but also mysterious. She appears to harbor much deeper thoughts than what her hashtags suggest, and her selfie seems to be more than a demonstration of her skill as a make-up artist. Although her hashtags give her exposure, they do not represent

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81 | Kris Holt, 'The 20 Most Popular Tags on Instagram', *The Daily Dot*, 9 July 2012, <http://www.dailydot.com/culture/20-most-popular-instagram-tags/>.

82 | Tifentale, 'The Selfie', p. 12.

83 | Rubinstein and Sluis, 'A Life More Photographic', p. 19.

84 | Julia Turner, '#InPraiseOfTheHashtag', *The New York Times*, 2 November 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/04/magazine/in-praise-of-the-hashtag.html?pagewanted=all>.

85 | lilyelixirmakeup, '#makeupartist#makeup#soft\_makeup#daytime\_makeup#selfie#natural\_browns#natural#maquiagem#natural', 7:45 PM, 10 May 2014, [http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/717698514643722771\\_1322932695](http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/717698514643722771_1322932695).

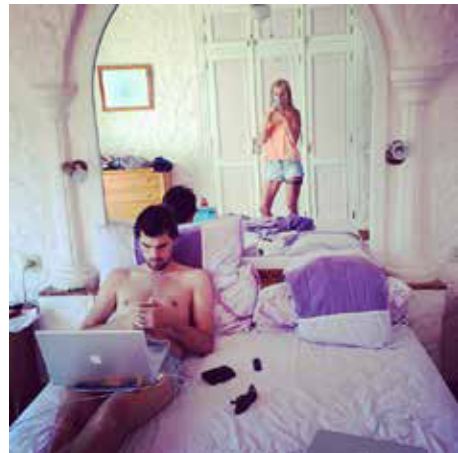
her as a unique person. Instead, the presence of her hashtags averts the viewer from reading more deeply into her facial expression. Her hashtags remove the inherent wonder in her image, and she, as a person, is overlooked. Thus, hashtags enable us to consume more images and not necessarily contemplate ideas about others.

Flusser notes, 'if it is the intention of writing to mediate between human beings and their images, it can also obscure images instead of representing them and insinuate itself between human beings and their images'.<sup>86</sup> The hashtag appears to have this effect on the image; it immediately disenchanting an image by breaking it down into simple concepts. The hashtag device drives us to dissect and objectify elements in images and encourages us to fragment images and, quite possibly, ourselves. As if creating a checklist, we hashtag any and all things, and we accept an image's hashtags as a form of truth, logic, and/or computer/Instagram jargon, neglecting to question what it is we are looking at while we scan an image in search of hashtags' referents.

The process of assigning hashtags inhibits us from looking at images as pictures with complex layers. For example, user stundziene has created a series of images that incorporate puzzling placements between herself, her partner, their electronics, and their room (see figs. 12 through 17). When one reads an image's hashtags, it diverts one from discovering visual nuances since hashtags place all words and phrases on an equal level. Without a designated precedence of importance, the significance of subjects and objects becomes flattened when deciphering the messages in this user's images.



**FIGURE 12:** STUNDZIENE, 'IS IT A #SELFIE, IS IT A #PHOTO-BOMB? ...', 4:34 AM, 27 JULY 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, STUNDZIENE.



**FIGURE 13:** STUNDZIENE, 'IS IT A #SELFIE, IS IT A #PHOTO-BOMB? VOL. 2. ...', 1:44 AM, 28 JULY 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, STUNDZIENE.

In figure 12, stundziene stands slightly off-center in the mirror, placing herself in the center of the image. Holding her camera phone in front of her face, she elongates her figure

86 | Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy*, p. 12.

and creates a symmetrical pose. Her companion is engrossed in his computer's screen, displaying the same level of focus that the woman has with her camera phone. Their electronic devices are scattered across the bed, which demonstrates their importance and pervasiveness. The woman's hashtags question whether or not her image is a 'selfie' and if her companion's presence is a 'photobomb', even though he appears to be indifferent to her picture-taking and exhibits neither annoyance nor delight.

In the next image, we see the man displaying the same level of interest with his gadgets, still indifferent to the woman taking the picture (see fig. 13). The woman and the man seem to be taking turns exposing their bodies to the camera phone: she wore a bikini yesterday, and today he wears a pair of boxers. They assume almost identical positions, as if they are mimicking the pose of each other's upper body by remaining engaged with their hand-held devices. Neither subject breaks eye contact with his or her screen.

The hashtags in figure 13 are similar to the previous image, but 'vol. 2' of this selfie series includes '#apple', '#me', '#home', and '#villa'. These hashtags appear to have no order of importance, and one notices that '#apple' comes before '#me', suggesting that Apple is more important than or, at the very least, equivalent to the user. The frame in this photo is less composed than in the first, and the slightly tilted angle creates the illusion that the viewer could easily pick up the second computer and join the man on the bed. In this way, the image becomes inviting – even as its subjects appear to be mentally detached from each other – and if the viewer is using his or her smartphone to look at this image, he or she, too, is mimicking the same upper body posture as the man and the woman.



**FIGURE 14:** STUNDZIENE, 'IS IT A #SELFIE, IS IT A #PHOTO-BOMB? VOL. 3 ...', 4:19 AM, 28 JULY 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, STUNDZIENE.



**FIGURE 15:** STUNDZIENE, 'IT'S A #SELFIE. I'M DOCUMENTING MY #BIKINIS. ...', 6:03 AM, 28 JULY 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, STUNDZIENE.

Several hours later, user stundziene uploads another image of herself and her partner. They are much closer to the viewer's vantage point than in the previous image, as though they are beginning to encroach into the viewer's personal space (see fig. 14). Even though

their bodies are in close proximity, they fail to consider each other; again, both subjects are occupied with their screens. User stundziene is still captivated by her reflection, almost fixated on it, and perhaps she stares at herself in real-time on her screen before uploading her image to Instagram. The man lies on the bed and places his hand over his face; his mouth is masked. Similarly, stundziene does the same but only it is her iPhone that covers half of her face. Their devices seem to reflect the couple's silence and disengagement with one another: their eyes remain locked, almost transfixed, to their screens.

Two hours later, stundziene returns to the mirror without her male companion. She appears to be much more relaxed in this image, as she leans into her shoulders, slanting the frame of the image and molding her fingers comfortably onto her camera phone (see fig. 15). Her gaze is softer, more intimate, in comparison to the images in which the man is present. Although she has announced that she is documenting her bikinis – ‘it’s a #selfie. I’m documenting my #bikinis’ – she returns to the mirror so frequently that one begins to wonder if she is more interested in capturing her body and uses hashtags to make this activity socially acceptable. It could be said that many users’ obsessions are blanketed by hashtags as a purported act of sharing. By using hashtags, users conceal their compulsive behaviors.



**FIGURE 16:** STUNDZIENE, ‘IS IT A #SELFIE, IS IT A #PHOTO-BOMB? VOL. 4. ...’, 6:13 AM, 28 JULY 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, STUNDZIENE.



**FIGURE 17:** STUNDZIENE, STUNDZIENE, ‘IT’S A #SELFIE, AGAIN. ANOTHER ADDITION TO MY INSTAGRAM ...’, 10:37 AM, 28 JULY 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE, STUNDZIENE.

In the next image, stundziene’s male companion returns to their bed ten minutes after she has uploaded the image of herself alone in the mirror (see fig. 16). Looking at her hashtags more closely, it is unclear if her caption, ‘is it a #selfie, is it a #photobomb? vol. 4’, acknowledges the man’s presence as a comedic reference or as a disruption. In this image, it is the first time we see both of the subject’s faces, which carry similar, blank expressions. The woman and the man continue to maintain eye contact with their screens. The woman’s body pose begins to resemble a prayer-like position, as if she is honoring her iPhone. Their placement in the room creates a sense of loneliness, which is accentuated by the imprint of a missing figure on the pillow propped up against the mirror.

In the last image of stundziene's selfie series, she returns to the mirror by herself. Based on the ritual-like reoccurrence of these images on her profile, it is safe to assume that she has a magnetic-like attraction to her reflection and camera phone (see fig. 17). Possibly because of an uncontrollable urge to capture herself – an auto-voyeuristic practice – she centers herself in the room and gets as close to the mirror as possible by positioning herself at the edge of the bed. Taking numerous pictures of herself while on vacation, one can only wonder how much of her time was spent documenting her bikinis versus experiencing the '#canaryislands'.

Rubinstein and Sluis observed that the design of an online photographic portfolio 'included a consideration of the aesthetics and visual language of the website interface'.<sup>87</sup> Presently, these websites have 'prioritised the optimization of link titles, document titles, copywriting, site structure and metadata for a non-human audience'.<sup>88</sup> In this way, 'the algorithmic and computational aspects of the image takes precedence over the visual'.<sup>89</sup> One can see Rubinstein and Sluis' insights manifested in junior\_m30's selfie and his use of the hashtag function.<sup>90</sup> He poses for the camera in a soft way and looks away from his smartphone camera. His numerous hashtags – '#people', '#boy', '#gay', '#sexy', '#pickday', '#picknight', '#picktheday', '#instatigran', '#statigran', '#facebook', '#instalovers', '#goodnight', '#sexyguy', and '#boystudent' – begin to define his identity, and his selfie takes on the advertising qualities of a product. He describes and categorizes himself in Instagram jargon, almost removing the human features of his image with metadata. This dehumanization is perhaps unintentional, a result of the immediacy facilitated by the program. In order to stand out on Instagram, junior\_m30 must keep pace with other users who are also trying to be noticed.

In a *New York Times* article, Ashley Parker interviewed Democratic strategist Tracey Self, who, when asked about the use of hashtags on Twitter, stated, 'if Twitter is a compression of ideas and a compression of expression, then hashtags are just an extension of that, so of course it bleeds over into other forms of communication'.<sup>91</sup> As ideas become compressed through the use of hashtags, the imperative of efficiency replaces the time needed for reflection.<sup>92</sup> This is all the more true with self-portraits, which have quickly morphed into fast-paced 'selfies' that can be produced, stylized, hashtagged, and uploaded in seconds. Given the hashtag function's ability to provide immediate image aggregation, it is interesting to reflect upon early 20th-century philosopher Walter Benjamin's observation about the speed of pictorial reproduction:

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87 | Rubinstein and Sluis, 'Notes on the Margins of Metadata', p. 153.

88 | Rubinstein and Sluis, 'Notes on the Margins of Metadata', p. 153.

89 | Rubinstein and Sluis, 'Notes on the Margins of Metadata', p. 153.

90 | junior\_m30, '#people #boy #gay #sexy #pickday #picknight #picktheday #instatigran #statigran #facebook #instalovers #goodnight #sexyguy #boystudent', 12:01 AM, 13 August 2013, [http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php~ /detail/521413066043015283\\_467123951](http://iconosquare.com/viewer.php~ /detail/521413066043015283_467123951).

91 | Ashley Parker, 'Twitter's Secret Handshake', *The New York Times*, 10 June 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/fashion/hashtags-a-new-way-for-tweets-cultural-studies.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/fashion/hashtags-a-new-way-for-tweets-cultural-studies.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

92 | Yang, 'We Know What @You #Tag': 8. Researchers discovered that the 'length of hashtags presents a negative relationship with hashtag adoption, possibly because people tend to adopt short and concise hashtags'.

For the first time, photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction – tasks that now devolved upon the eye alone. And since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was enormously accelerated, so that it could now keep pace with speech.<sup>93</sup>

Less than 100 years after Benjamin's observation, one could argue that since the introduction of the hashtag function language is accelerating to keep pace with images. The self-portrait is no longer comprised of visual representation alone; it also includes fragments of metadata that we assign to it. Our hashtags have become as important as our selfies, and we may view identity as simple as we describe it via hashtags. Although the hashtag enables us to share images efficiently, it does not enable us to contemplate images. As we seem to be confronted with more images than words on a daily basis, it seems remiss, as a society, to discount the influence that hashtags have on self-expression and identity.

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93 | Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott, et al., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 20-21.

# No Photo: The Willing and the Unwilling

*If, in making a portrait, you hope to grasp the interior silence of a willing victim, it's very difficult, but you must somehow position the camera between his shirt and his skin. Whereas with pencil drawing, it is up to the artist to have an interior silence.*

- HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON, 'IF, IN MAKING A PORTRAIT'

Gisèle Freund, a 20th-century photographer and writer, observed that the advent of photography obsolesced 'the art of the portrait as it was practiced by painters, miniaturists, and engravers'.<sup>94</sup> Although early photographic portraits tended to follow the conventions of painting portraiture, the camera soon enabled new gestures for subjects to enact in portraits once the camera's shutter could capture human movement at rapid speeds. For an instant, subjects positioned themselves in front of enchanting black boxes, and these apparatuses captured their likenesses in a single frame.

As photographic portraits became affordable, facial expressions became common and uniform, and society was taught to smile for the camera and greet the camera warmly.<sup>95</sup> Freund describes the smile as the removal of the 'last individual trait in portrait photographs' and notes that the smile made photographic portraits 'parodies of human faces'.<sup>96</sup> Today, we make new parodies of our faces with expressions like the 'duck face', and these new facial expressions are learned behaviors maintained by capture technologies.

Most of our selfies become instant clichés after capture. In her essay about snapshot photography, Lynn Berger notes that the word *cliché*, originating in 19th-century France, was first used to refer to metal plates that created reproductions on a printing press.<sup>97</sup> The word became a cultural reference around the time Kodak introduced the Brownie camera to the public in 1888.<sup>98</sup> Berger keenly observes that Kodak 'prescribed the kinds of photography that the new class of amateurs was to take – of family, leisure, and vacation'.<sup>99</sup> Thus, consumers were provided with a visual formula to take their snapshots.<sup>100</sup> In retrospect, one can see how cameras, pictures, and advertisements have influenced our behavior and the ways in which we visually represent ourselves to others. Instagram provides us with the platform and tools to create selfies, but it also motivates us to create never-ending cycles of selfies as though the program challenges us to mimic other users or create new trends; it is as if we are in competition with other users. In essence, our self-fascination and desire to be seen fuels the program.

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94 | Gisèle Freund, *Photography & Society*, David R. Godine: Boston, 1980, p. 35.

95 | Freund, *Photography & Society*, pp. 63-64.

96 | Freund, *Photography & Society*, pp. 63-64.

97 | Lynn Berger, 'Snapshots, or: Visual Culture's Clichés', *Photographies* (2011): 176, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17540763.2011.593922#.U7Ev8qiPDck>.

98 | Berger, 'Snapshots': 177.

99 | Berger, 'Snapshots': 177.

100 | Berger, 'Snapshots': 177-178.



Interestingly, many people appear to take selfies without the intention of passing these images down to succeeding generations as a legacy, which seems to contradict the messages of Kodak's early advertisements. This behavioral shift illustrates how selfies have become part of our identities, as we do not intend to share our selfies as a legacy but as we are in the now. In the future, selfies could become even more essential to people and taking them could become part of their daily routines, as some people have already begun to demonstrate on Instagram. It is questionable as to whether or not future generations will have access to family members' Instagram accounts once they have passed away. If Instagram users have private accounts, it seems as though they will their visual legacy to social media companies, which begs the question: what are we accomplishing by creating selfies?



FIGURE 18: 'THE ARTIST', 1900-1910, CYANOTYPE, NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON.

The trope of posing in front of a mirror with one's camera has been in existence since the early days of photography. This self-portrait method perhaps derives more from the photographer's self-fascination than from the desire to memorialize his or her self. The camera is an integral component in this kind of image; it occupies the same space as its owner. For example, the woman depicted in the cyanotype from the early 1900s has positioned herself in front of a mirror, with the camera steadily resting on its tripod (see fig. 18). Delicate curtains frame the photograph; it appears to have been taken in a bedroom or personal space with just enough sunlight to fill the room. The camera and tripod are

about half as tall as she and are positioned in front of her almost as if the camera is a small child. The woman's hands are placed gently on the black box, a gesture that may signify the substantial bond she has formed with her camera. The expression on her face looks strained, as if she is afraid she will ruin her photograph. Her posture indicates that she is excited, almost proud to be experimenting with the device – perhaps it is new. Possibly, out of curiosity, she stares straight into the mirror, cracks a smile of uncertainty, and releases the shutter. In that moment, she would have been unaware of how the photograph would look since she would not see it until after the negative was developed. The image, by offering her unknown self to her, would have taken on wondrous qualities.

The facial expression of *dope\_cubann* is dissimilar from the woman's uncertain smile in figure 18; *dope\_cubann* stares at her image displayed on her smartphone's screen without emotion (see fig. 19). Her selfie is delicately composed: one hand is positioned at the middle of her waist while her other hand is wrapped around her smartphone. She appears to be in a domestic space, one that is cluttered with items, and she takes her picture in a mirror that is propped up against a counter on which her purse rests. She kneels on the floor, as if she desires to capture both her body and her face within the confines of the mirror – the camera phone overlaps her face. Her expression is relaxed, but also dulled; she knows how her picture will turn out and shows no signs of surprise – it is as if she is in a Narcissus-like state.



**FIGURE 19:** DOPE\_CUBANN, 'LOOK AT THAT BADDIE...', 12:10 AM, 11 MAY 2013, DIGITAL IMAGE. DOPE\_CUBANN.

User principbadwinter has also positioned herself in front of the mirror, in a space that appears to be a hallway or a bathroom; she is dressed in all black.<sup>101</sup> She makes her body angular by arching her back and wrapping one of her forearms atop of the purse that hangs on her shoulder. In contrast to *dope\_cubann*, she stares at the mirror with an almost lustful gaze and smiles at it as if she possesses a secret that the mirror desires. Her eyes are directed towards the mirror and not at the viewer. Her smartphone is next to her face, and she awkwardly holds this device next to her head with one hand. Her smartphone's case is white and the word 'PRINCI' and the number '23' are printed in dark blue in its center. The placement of the device enables her to tilt the image frame, and she appears diagonal to the viewer. Perhaps she does not realize that her smartphone has become part of interpreting her character as it is the focal point of the image.

User *tyeingknots* has indicated on his profile that he is a 'Natural Vegan' and 'Whey Athlete', and he has posted several pictures of his body and his food on his profile.<sup>102</sup> In one of his selfies, *tyeingknots* takes a shirtless picture of himself in front of a bathroom mirror and directs his gaze towards his smartphone's screen to look at his mediated self.<sup>103</sup> In this image, he has positioned himself behind a sink and in front of a shower. The background of the image is dark and, in the corner, an open toilet peers out from behind him. Because of this object's presence, it appears that *tyeingknots* concentrates more on how he looks on screen rather than in the environment he has chosen to represent himself. After uploading his image, *tyeingknots*' network can see him admiring himself, exposing his bare torso.

In another selfie, *tyeingknots* takes his picture in a gym locker room.<sup>104</sup> As he lacks a physical audience, he extends his image to a virtual audience. In the foreground of the image, we can see one of his ears and shoulders. The middle ground of the image shows a large mirror mounted to a black wall; he displays his flexed back muscles on to it. A thick necklace hangs down his back. He holds his smartphone outwards with one hand, and he bends his elbow upwards to place his smartphone in front of his face; the mirror image of his selfie is displayed on his smartphone's screen. In the background, the viewer can see another mirror in which *tyeingknots*' face is in the center; he looks as though he is smiling, but his facial expression is hard to read, as his face is blurry in the image. Above the mirror in the background is a white clock that hangs on a yellow and beige colored wall. A black fan rests on the floor underneath the table, which is positioned below the mirror; half of a urinal is also present in this image. The appeal of this environment is most likely its mirrors, as *tyeingknots* can see the definition of his muscles from various angles on more than one reflective surface. His body appears four times in the image – perhaps five times if one counts his glare in one of the mirrors. Each representation of himself

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101 | principbadwinter, '#me #instaday #instapic #instamood #instagood #instalive #igers #brunette #italiangirl #sexylady #classygirl #fitnessgirl #curvy #tubino #chanel #2.55 #ibamboli #dodo #proviamoafarnecento #100happydays #selfie #tagforlike #likeforlike #like4like #condividi #bimbaminchia', 9:57 PM, 6 May 2014, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/714865784724975573\\_200566850](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/714865784724975573_200566850).

102 | 'tyeingknots', *Iconsquare*, 2014, <http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/user/409731523/>.

103 | *tyeingknots*, 'Keep gettin gainz #gains #gainz #muscle #fitspo #ripped #health #clean #diet #exercise #hi #followme #hashtag #natural #vegan #plusfish', 4:32 PM, 12 February 2014, <http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/654575958142472829>.

104 | *tyeingknots*, 'Back progress! Starting a 3 week bulk to prepare for a contest in a month or two. My girl @hopeandhardwork convinced me to do it. FOLLOW HER and her road to a bikini comp. Natural vegan athlete. No test boosters or cycles. Keep it simple, good multi good preworkout and good protein and above all GREAT DIET! #vegan #shredded #abs #bulk #fitfam #athlete #ripped #lean #muscle #followme #diet', 7:09 PM, 2 July 2013, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/491549972070125951\\_409731523](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/491549972070125951_409731523).

depicts a portion of his body that he seems to be proud of: his shoulders, back, face, and chest. User *tyeingknots* dissects his body in these mirrors and shows the many sides of himself to his network as a *work-in-progress*. He casually reproduces himself and it seems as though he takes pictures as a form of self-entitlement, which explains the composition of his image: he fully represents himself but neglects to represent his environment with equal care. He focuses on magnifying his presence in a both physical and virtual space.

Another theme that emerged in photography with the invention of the snapshot camera was ‘the unwilling subject’, a style coined by Diane Waggoner, which symbolized resistance to being photographed.<sup>105</sup> As shown in figure 20, the subject Marie has positioned her hand in front of her face perfectly and has spread her fingers out to block the camera, possibly from annoyance with the photographer. As a mode of defense or resistance, a person could protect his or her self from being reproduced or objectified in a photograph by shielding his or her face from the camera. This reaction to the camera was viewed as a subject’s right; but on Instagram, users upload images of themselves blocking their faces to their user profiles. This gesture, unless one is a celebrity who is fleeing from paparazzi, appears to function less as a method for anti-capture but more as a stylization of resistance.



**FIGURE 20:** ‘MARIE’, 1889, ALBUMEN PRINT, CHARLES WALTER AMORY FAMILY, NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON.

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105 | Waggoner, ‘Photographic Amusements’, p. 20.

For example, in user *wisevision\_*'s selfie, which could have been taken by a friend, he holds a camera with his right hand as he attempts to block another camera's flash with his left hand.<sup>106</sup> He squints and acts surprised by the light source; he looks dazed. His image is black-and-white and reminiscent of celebrity paparazzi photos. He has captioned his image with 'No photo!' which suggests that he is mimicking this gesture from popular culture – yet his numerous hashtags such as '#instamood', '#iphoneonly', '#bestoftheday', and '#photooftheday' suggest that he wants people to view this image. It is unclear whether or not he is mocking or celebrating the culture that his image references. His gesture appears to be intentionally fabricated, which implies that *wisevision\_* is not truly resisting the camera, but rather he is trying to be cool by pretending to reject his audience. His use of the filter function elevates him to a status in which he appears to be desirable, chased and sought after by others. Since this image looks orchestrated, it does not convey his annoyance but seems to suggest his control over his image and, possibly, his network. Perhaps, as a form of control, *wisevision\_* deleted this image from his user profile, as it 'no longer exists'.<sup>107</sup> As much as we are attracted to our selfies, it seems that certain versions of ourselves are disposable. It could be that we delete selfies when we no longer feel numbed or amplified by them.

Like *wisevisionphoto*, user *megaanwines* blocks her face with her hand, but the back of her hand faces the viewer rather than her palm.<sup>108</sup> Her hand and arm are ornamented with various bracelets and rings. She has spread her fingers out and placed them in front of her face, turning her head slightly to the left as if she is protecting herself. Her hand begins to function like a product display. If it were not for the amateur lighting in her image, it could be interpreted as an advertisement. The position of her body and the angle of the camera suggest that *megaanwines* took this picture herself. She looks as though she is shielding her face, almost to silence herself, her hand serving as the vehicle of expression. One is first drawn to her jewelry, and her face becomes secondary in this picture. It appears as though she is repressing herself by stylizing her image in this way.

User *zjetthrey* has created a selfie with an intriguing camera angle: the palm of his left hand reaches for his smartphone while his face looks down at the screen.<sup>109</sup> His hand dominates the frame; one could get lost following the creases in his palm. He has positioned himself to fit within the frame of the smartphone's screen, shifting his upper body to do so. The image is slightly blurry, and the expression on his face and the extreme perspective create a sense of anxiety. Because his palm is positioned in the foreground, it is as if he is trying to grab the viewer, possibly to squash the viewer's window into his virtual world. This image is also interesting to view in the context of paparazzi imagery. It appears that *zjetthrey* could have grabbed the camera in order to stop a photographer in the act of capture. His behavior, which appears to be slightly aggressive in nature towards image capture, is self-

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106 | *wisevision\_*, 'No photo!', #photography #blackandwhite #selfportrait #filter #instagood #tweegram #photooftheday #iphonesia #instamood #igers #picoftheday #iphoneography #iphoneonly #tbt #instagramhub #instadaily #jj #bestoftheday #igdaily #webstagram #picstitch #instagramers #versagram #statigram #jj\_forum #instago #instahub #all\_shots #ignation #wisevision', 3:57 PM, 6 January 2013, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php~/detail/363198356086128690\\_191145319](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php~/detail/363198356086128690_191145319).

107 | It is possible that many of the images in this study will become deleted or made private by users in the near future.

108 | *megaanwines*, '#portrait #portraits #portraiture #selfportrait #face #eyes #mouth #lips #hair #rings #vintage #TAGSTAGRAM.COM #me #myself #cute #selfshot #pose #moi #closeup #love #instalovers #instafamous #life #model #selfie #selfies #tagstagramers #tagsta #tagsta\_people', 4:53 PM, 6 January 2013, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/363226412030199869\\_14401633](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/363226412030199869_14401633).

109 | *zjetthrey*, '#nophotos', 1:06 AM, 19 May 2013, [http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/458843064061440983\\_23885555](http://iconsquare.com/viewer.php#/detail/458843064061440983_23885555).

inflicted. Although zjetthrey's facial expression conveys irritation, this image speaks to the fact that people who *want* to be captured by the camera have now appropriated this gesture.

User zjetthrey's image is hashtagged with the caption 'nophotos'. In June 2014, over 9,000 user images and videos were hashtagged with 'nophoto' and over 14,000 user images and videos were hashtagged with 'nophotos' on Instagram. Those who pretend to refuse the camera seem to demonstrate their superiority over others. Perhaps rejecting the camera symbolizes one's control over his or her image. However, placing selfies on this platform also means that users relinquish their rights to their images (if users have public profiles), as they do not control how other users will distribute their selfies within and outside of the Instagram network.

When we engage or pose with the smartphone in our selfies, we appear to hold the smartphone's presence as the equivalent to our own, which implies that we have difficulty separating ourselves from this device. The camera becomes more than a tool or a companion; it is a visual voice that speaks for us and molds our images for others to see. We mimic other people and pose ourselves accordingly in mirrors only to capture versions of us that accommodate the limitations of the program. In an image-driven culture, a person has little will to resist programs that occupy his or her attention with one's self. It could be that we no longer feel the need to protect our images or identities.

# Conclusion

## THE NEW SELF-PORTRAIT

Perhaps we believe that Instagram is essential for making us appear special to others and also to ourselves. The notion of becoming greater through images may explain our need to document and then stylize every second of our being: we want to appear significant, and we look to our image to signify this fact to us. It seems as though the selfie acts as a substitute for our wants, needs, and desires. It is a constant in our lives, as we can take a selfie at any moment. Upon viewing it, the selfie gives us instant, yet fleeting, gratification.

For most of us, one selfie isn't enough. As though we are trapped by the lure of an ideal self, we produce a never-ending cycle of selfies with different looks and hashtags. We lose ourselves inside a program of possibilities and do not realize that this program alters our self-awareness, as we capture, edit, and share our selfies from our mobile devices. We become amplified and, simultaneously, isolated by our selfies, as though we are unable to disengage from Instagram and our digital reflections.

The filters and hashtags that we add to our selfies enhance our images and make them appear extraordinary to us. These functions provide us with the promise of pluripotentiality and allow us to become timeless and omnipresent on Instagram's platform; however, we surrender our temporal identities in order to become stylized, quantified, and distributed on Instagram. Furthermore, these functions have embedded unknown messages into our self-portraits. The layers of information or data that we add to our selfies change their meanings and make them difficult to decode – there are many nuances about these images that we have yet to realize.

It is possible that we are unable to realize certain nuances and meanings about selfies, as our reflections have always mesmerized us. All of our selfies look almost identical on Instagram, which illustrates the power that the camera and the network have over us; it seems that this connection is so strong that we *will* our selfies to the program without a second thought, and we relinquish our personal distinctions, our identities, to be seen on Instagram. Ubiquity, although it is inherent to photography, is not inherent to identity, and it appears that we have yet to make this distinction for ourselves. We find our selfies in multitude more compelling, and more valued, than a thoughtful, single representation of ourselves.

Despite this, the selfie seems to be a future-oriented image as it is only one picture in our self-series. The selfie also seems to be less demonstrative of one's culmination of experience and more representative his or her existence in an instant. We seem to be compelled to produce and customize selfies in great quantities rather than perceive how we, as people, are part of the world. By creating our own virtual environments – shrines to ourselves – we fail to notice that we are limiting ourselves by focusing too much on our selfies. As if we are unable to understand our being-in-the-world, we become accustomed to our being-in-the-image.

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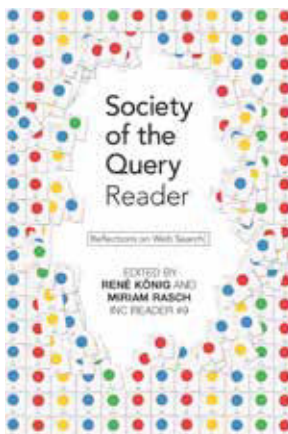
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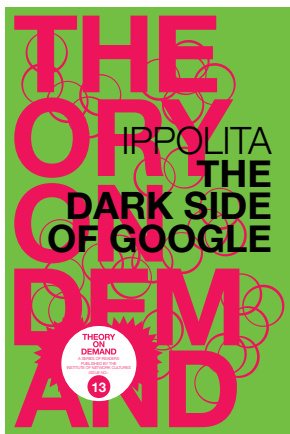
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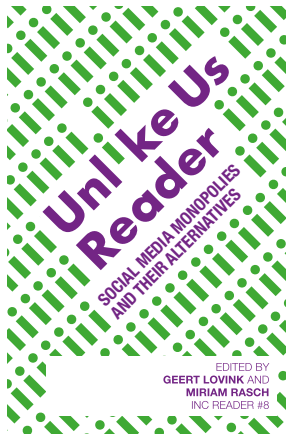
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Over 130 million images with the hashtag 'selfie' have been uploaded to the social media platform Instagram. In *The Allure of the Selfie: Instagram and the New Self-Portrait*, Brooke Wendt examines the significant hold that the 'selfie', or the digital self-portrait, has over self and society. Media theorist Vilém Flusser observed that society could become programmed to snap pictures for the sole benefit of cameras, as though under a 'magical spell', if photographs continued to be undecoded. Wendt examines this magical spell by analyzing users' self-portraits on Instagram, one of the most popular contemporary platforms for image production.

Marshall McLuhan's reframing of the Narcissus myth elucidates the allure of the selfie. McLuhan notes that Narcissus was numb to his mirror image and did not recognize his reflection as his own – he thought his image was that of another. As though unaware that we are looking at ourselves, we quickly become numb to our selfies, taking numerous pictures of ourselves without hesitation. It is the promise of pluripotentiality that fascinates us; however, we are also perpetually tempted and trapped by the notion of creating an ideal self with digital tools such as filter and hashtag functions. In the five essays comprising *The Allure of the Selfie: Instagram and the New Self-Portrait*, Brooke Wendt thus questions the changing nature of identity and the self-portrait in the age of Instagram.

**Brooke Wendt** is a visual culture critic, photographer, and curator. She holds a BFA in Photography from Kendall College of Art and Design (Grand Rapids, Michigan) and an MA in Critical Theory and Creative Research from Pacific Northwest College of Art (Portland, Oregon). Currently, Brooke Wendt works as a strategic researcher in the design strategy field and questions the purposes of new technologies.

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