Identity Crafting: Reading the Agency and Art Implicit in Selfies

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to unravel the craftsmanship of online identities implicit in taking and sharing selfies and to measure the immediate or resulting violence by imposed definition upon the subject-photographer. This paper especially focuses on the identity building of young women on the social networking platform Instagram. Crucial to the research are Susan Sontag's work on photography philosophy relating to violence inflicted upon subjects, Gregory Ulmer's work on electracy, and Liana De Girolami Cheney's research into artistic conventions of self-portraiture dating back from the Renaissance to the present. The highly constructed nature of selfies, an emerging art form that can be viewed as continuance in self-portraiture, functions dually to give the artist agency and to enact violence against him or herself.

According to Susan Sontag (1977), since photography has become an accessible form of record-keeping, the human imagination has developed a new "grammar and ethics of seeing" (p. 3). As mechanical as this mimetic form is, promising the capacity "to hold the whole world in our heads," photography is as interpretative and dishonest as any other visual art form (p. 3). Indeed, the art of photography often produces devastating social consequences when accepted as truth. Sontag continues, "there is aggression implicit in every use of the camera" (p. 7). As the language surrounding photography suggests, the act of capturing a person's image or shooting a camera is an act of violence; a photograph is shot to contextualize its subjects in a way that looks like truth. Yet the photograph—as infallible as the medium seems—is as contrived as any other art form. Because of its easily masked manipulation the photograph becomes dangerous in how it portrays its subjects. But how does this translate when the photographer and the subject are one and the same? Is the selfie photographer perpetrating self-harm against his or her own identity or is he or she inflicting violence upon the conventions of self-portraiture?

Since the invention of the front-facing camera, first introduced with the iPhone 4 in 2010, the selfie has emerged as a new form of portraiture. Instead of being considered an art form, it is more often used in the lives of young adults as evidence of the increasing narcissism and unhealthy dependence on and isolation in technology found in the behavior of young adults. Frequently headlines herald the end of face-to-face communication as members of the Me Generation loses themselves in smartphones (Fallon, 2014, p. 54). There is a staunch condemnation of the "insularity of the average smartphone user's world—experienced only through screens as the older generations imagine" (p. 55). In reality, this opinion conflicts with the overwhelming sharing capacities smartphones offer. Moreover, "the impulse to share a selfie" is an act of community rather than one of isolation, as it is gesturing to and sharing with others (p. 55). The selfie is instrumental in maintaining the human element in online communities and in the preservation of relationships during spatial absences. This article will examine Sontag's ideas involving the violence of photography as a means to assert control over the perception of reality in relation to the selfie. In other words, the selfie could be an attempt to manipulate how one is viewed through the use of online spaces. Assuming artistic license over

one's identity is a power move. Therefore, is the photographer in these instances violating himself or herself—or the attached preconceptions to self-promotion in the digital milieu?

Before proceeding to the analysis of selfies, it is important to identify the gendered "grammar and ethics of seeing" implicit in photography. The most important distinction is between men and women as subjects: "a man . . . is seen [while] women are looked at" (Sontag, 2001, p. 241). Women assume the "exhibitionist role" as visual culture is geared toward heterosexual men (Mulvey, 1975, p. 837). As a result, the anxiety about what a photograph shows differs wildly for men and women. The social conventions of femininity dictate that women must care about their outward appearances and adjust their appearances for the pleasure of men. Although this is a requirement for women navigating society successfully, this necessity has branded women as vain and self-absorbed. These gendered criticisms are transferred to the selfie-taking generation—both internally and externally.

For example, the 2014 song "#Selfie" by the new and otherwise obscure DJ duo, The Chainsmokers, criticizes young women—or, more specifically, a condensed, particularly awful stereotype of the blonde valley girl—that allegedly have to document their entire existences through selfies online, as exemplified in the following lyrics:

> Can you guys help me pick a filter?
> I don't know if I should go with XX Pro or Valencia.
> I want to look tan.
> What should my caption be?
> I want it to be clever.
> How about "Livin' with my bitches, Hashtag LIV"
> I only got 10 likes in the last 5 minutes.
> Do you think I should take it down?
> Let me take another selfie ("#Selfie Lyrics," n.d.)

The title of the song stylized with a hashtag emphasizes the connection of selfies to the wealth of sharing capacities online. This picture of the selfie-photographer—portrayed by two women in the music video—boils down the entire motivation behind the selfie to attention on the Internet, specifically Instagram.

It is unsurprising that many people, especially young women seeking validation, feel the need to self-insert themselves into the space of the Internet. Online communication and the related technology reshape human interaction; they do not in fact eradicate the need for it. According to Gregory Ulmer in his 2009 online book *Networked*, "the Internet is an emerging institution that is to electracy what school was to literacy" (para. 1). This concept of electracy marks the transition from traditional literacy as a result of digital technologies. In this way, the selfie is an example of this reshaping and the act of sharing selfies is an experimental "new media networked practice" (para. 9). When selfies are targeted—and by extension those who take and share them—it is primarily young women who receive the brunt of the criticism, usually in the form of traditional gendered stereotypes about vanity and self-absorption.

In effect the selfie is a means of personal world making and identity shaping in the plane of electracy. The delivery of selfies via social networking sites shows that the emphasis is not

entirely self-oriented; rather, it shows that selfies are designed for an audience. Selfies, and other types of photographs shared online, are distributed with the intent to "foster connectedness amongst online friends and followers [as well as] to construct one's online identity" (Chandler & Livingston, 2012, p. 4). Ulmer (2009) shows a move in importance from the epistemology in literacy to the aesthetics in the burgeoning electracy (para. 4). Whether the selfie is shared as proof of an ongoing individual narrative or as an example of the individual as art, the overarching priority is placed on presentation, not any meaning or necessarily factual detailing of the subject of a selfie. Epistemology falls to the wayside in online photographic narratives as mood and appearance trump knowledge in a forum typically devoted to gaining and interacting with followers that would be utter strangers in real life. Another goal of the selfie taker, then, is to both be a source of and experience the entertainment found in online photosharing spaces like Instagram. On such public forums as Instagram, the face is still the subject of public scrutiny—especially when placed in brutal and overflowing tags like #selfie—but the face is supposed to reflect personality while maintaining an overarching online presence in the cases of Instagram and Tumblr because oftentimes selfies posted over a length of time are experienced in close proximity to one another. There must be coherence and cohesion in the presentation of the self.

The attention paid to aesthetics in electracy reflects the importance of appearance crucial in photography of the self and the self-determination inherent in self-photography. Appearance does not necessarily include the truth beyond the surface. While autobiography in terms of literacy provides facts—true or untrue—as narrative, the autobiography written in terms of electracy only gives impressions, and demonstrates taste and perceptions. Perhaps an autobiographical selfie can only reveal a narrative in conjunction with other selfies in online platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or Tumblr with the potential for narrative feeds. Regardless, there is poetry to the mystique of selfies—the tension between what is revealed and what is concealed—that cannot be uncovered without acknowledging the form's reliance on the Internet.

As so with commercial digital photography's reliance on the ability to "perfect" captured memories, selfies online rely on one's ability to curate a personal Internet museum to the self. In their work on mobile technology and photography, Chandler and Livingston (2012) comment on the easily accessible, mobile editing capacity previously limited only to photographers with substantial means:

> Photo-software for mobile devices is generous and forgiving, allowing the user to crop, correct, enhance, undo, combine and reproduce images at a single touch. Mistakes can be easily rectified, clarity increased, contrasts adjusted and colour boosted to create images that 'improve' and augment the real world subject matter captured by the camera (p. 3).

Moreover, the use of these corrective services can be "transparent" especially when in a stream of similar, equally edited photos (Lopes, 2003, p. 435). Coupled with a simple caption that indicates nothing of the editing process, a selfie can pass as a natural portrait when there is much more behind the scenes. Does this remove its validity as an autobiographical tool or does what the "artist" perform reveal anything?

Although the technology has changed and the subsequent sharing abilities even further distort reality from what is originally captured by the front-facing camera, the selfie is a continuation of

the self-portrait in more traditional mediums, primarily those done by and of women. According to De Girolami Cheney (2011) in her work on female self-portraits in the Renaissance, the portrait can be defined as

> a human image, individualized by physiognomic specification, subjected to artistic and psychological interpretation, presented as a work of art, and affected by the changing circumstances of perception (p.1).

The unstable interpretation of a portrait under different eyes is key. It is one of many things to consider when examining a portrait, including but not limited to the following: "motive for painting the work, . . . context, the setting, attire, coiffure, ornamentation, gestures and expression" (p. 1). All of these serve to veritably unmask the identity of the subject. However, a self-portrait is "far more than a likeness"; it is "a confession" (p. 3). In this way, selfies serve a similar purpose. They, after what could be a rigorous editing process and manipulated contextualization in online photo galleries, represent perhaps what the selfie-subject desires to be. Although most editing processes are concealed so as to uphold realism, it is impossible to deny that selfies are shared with the intent to be viewed by followers. Likewise, the earliest self-portraits showed images of the creative process—the painter had to portray herself painting to maintain a connection to reality or the context in which the painter painted herself. But that self-imposed reality was fabricated as most artists painted themselves from a reflection (similarly to the original selfies taken in front of mirrors with flip-phones). Already what is presented as reality is a reflection of what is real and the creative process can be reduced to a lie unfolding before one's own eyes.

And yet in art and in selfies what is real is not above aesthetic and identity in terms of importance. The art of self-portraits, especially in female painters, was "a source of revelation, not merely a signature" (De Girolami Cheney, 2011, p. 6). Not only did it explore the outward aesthetic of the subject but her desires. Beginning in the sixteenth century, female artists manipulated their role as women, typically seen as natural creators, into one in which they were their own design, observing themselves as "object[s] of beauty and admiration" (p. 8). Although women, especially privileged women hoping to be married, were expected to be beautiful yet docile, this form of painting allowed for more open and aggressive self-gratification and self-aggrandizing. How different is that from the act of taking selfies for young women today? It is a means to deciding that the way one views or desires to view herself is the most honest portrayal available.

In light of body-positivity movements, taking and sharing selfies seems to be a method of inverting the violence that Sontag ascribes to photography. While not always effective, as the very act of taking selfies plays into societal notions of female vanity, the selfie does allow for the photographer to be both a member of the audience and the dictator of his or her own portrayal. In this way there is a total agency given to the object of attention. Because photography and self-portraiture disclose and often evidence "dominant ideologies and existing social arrangements," the popularity of selfies could herald a change in the way women are viewed by others and—perhaps more importantly—themselves. By assuming the agency to define how one is viewed, the young generation is indeed undermining old conventions of identity and gender roles.

This is not to say that the selfie is without fault. Indeed, by putting oneself in the public eye, especially in the permanent yet fluid space of the Internet, the self is then commoditized and given a life of its own apart from its artist. As with all art, the individual viewer, despite the efforts of the photographer, decides interpretation and this leaves the identity of the photographer in a perpetual state of flux. Is the subject vain for being his or her own subject? How filtered is this portrayal? Although aesthetic choices give identity and agency to the subject-photographer, nothing else is certain. Even the very location of the selfie is impermanent as sharing capacities and the mobile natures of phones remove any real world context of the portraits. Ultimately, the photography of the self opens subjects up to a delayed violence. Even with total control of the presentation and craft of the identity through photography, the mobility and exposure of selfies create an innate violence and sometimes brutal, wide-armed exposure with which the newly crafted identity must contend.

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