

THE ‘SELFIE’ PHENOMENON AS A BASIS FOR SELF-IDENTITY SEARCH. PREAMBLE TO A PHILOSOPHY OF THE SELFIE PHOTOGRAPHY

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Abstract. The topicality of the problem is connected with the fact that nowadays photography has an important role in shaping the perception of ourselves. The state-of-the-arts analysis of the work related to the study of the ‘selfie’ phenomenon has shown the necessity for a deeper philosophical understanding of this issue. Thus, the article is meant by its authors as a pilot research to a larger and long-term humanitarian plunge in the philosophy of selfie photography, directly addressing the research fields of personality philosophy and psychology, visual anthropology, culture studies, self-presentation theory, behaviorist paradigm, semiotics of photography, and aesthetics of body. The study prospects shall provide an opportunity to develop and consider important discussions concerning contrasting philosophical aspects of selfie as social and culture phenomenon.

Keywords: selfie; photography; self-knowledge; identity; virtual space; self-expression

The article highlights the priority issue of selfies as a matter of both self-representation and self-knowledge as for less than a decade they have become an integral part of virtual reality. The state-of-the-arts analysis of the work related to the study of the ‘selfie’ phenomenon has shown the necessity for a deeper philosophical understanding of this issue. Nowadays, the mechanisms of self-reflection and self-knowledge should be re-explained on the basis of this social and culture phenomenon. The thematic research in historical context provides an opportunity to prove the authors’ position more precise. In each reviewed period (the daguerreotype era, the dawn of the photo camera, and the era of front-facing cameras on smartphones from 2009) we can find examples of ‘selfies’ as a search for personality self-identity. Since the first half of 19th century, selfies allow us to enter in a dialogue with our inner selves and, furthermore, find a straighter way to our identity.

1. Some Preliminary Notes: ‘Selfie’ Roots in Etymology and Social Practice

Today smartphones simultaneously replace a notebook, a computer, and a camcorder along with a camera for modern person. Many people can no longer live a single day without taking photos of themselves. This process has been given the name ‘selfie.’ Selfie (from the English word ‘selfie’ composed of the noun *self* and the suffix *-ie*, in Russian: ‘себяшка’ – *sebyashka*, which means ‘self-star’) is a form of self-portrait that consists of capturing oneself on a camera, sometimes by means of a mirror, a cord or a timer (*Merriam-Webster*: Selfie). In 2013, the term was lexicalized into the Oxford English Dictionary and defined as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013; Sorokowski, Pisanski, Sorokowska & Bruno, 2018: 19). Same year, ‘selfie’ was also named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries due to the frequency and prominence of its use in daily language.

Despite its recent etymological origin, selfie does not seem to be a new phenomenon in the world even in the times preceding social media. One of the first selfies refers to the American pioneer of photography and a lamp manufacturer Robert Cornelius. In 1839 he improved the daguerreotype film, which had been used for photography that time. In order to reduce shooting time, Cornelius photographed himself at the street in the daylight, outside the family store in Philadelphia (*Figure 1*). Thus, for the purpose of taking self-portrait, he had to sit still in front of the camera for several minutes.



Figure 1. The first selfie in the world is a photograph of Robert Cornelius. Dated to: ca. 1839. *Source:* Library of Congress

The first teenager to take a selfie was Anastasia Romanova, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Emperor Nikolay II of Russia. In 1914 the princess took a selfie of herself in front of the mirror by means of Kodak Brownie camera to send the photography to her friend (*Figure 2*). According to her memories presented in the letter, Anastasia described her experience of taking a selfie with trembling hands as the camera was too heavy.



Figure 2. The Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna of Russia. Selfie in the mirror. Dated to: ca. 1914. Source: <http://iconicphotos.ru/culture/selfie/>

The first group selfie was taken by the New York photographer from English origin Joseph Byron together with his colleagues in 1920. A picture of themselves was taken by the professional photographers on the roof of Marceau Studio on Fifth Avenue in New York, across the street from St. Patrick's Cathedral (Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1. The *first group selfie*. *Joseph Byron* in the studio of his *friend*.
Dated to: ca. 1920. Source: Museum of the City of New York

Nowadays standing with friends and taking different photos does not cause any difficulties. However, at that moment the cameras were heavy, and the authors of the photo had to hold the camera together. *Figure 3.2* presents side view of the photographers posing together for a photograph on the roof of Marceau's Studio, while Joseph Byron holds one side of the camera with his right hand and Ben Falk holds the other side with his left hand.



Figure 3.2. Photo by Byron's Company. Source: Museum of the City of New York

Inscription (*Figure 3.3*): Writing on paper attached to image on recto side (in pencil): "The way the photograph was made / on the roof of the Marceau Studio / Fifth Ave. opposite St. Patrick's Cathedral / Dec. 1920".

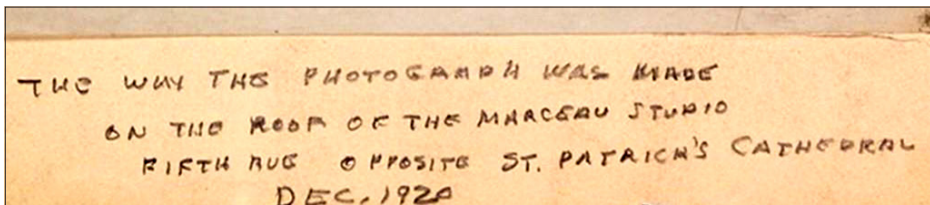


Figure 3.3. Photo by Byron's Company. Source: Museum of the City of New York

Why did selfies become so popular in the 21st century? This is due to the boom of social and information technologies. Most smartphones have front-facing cam-

eras that have made the selfie-photography process extremely easy. In addition, selfie users “send the message” that they live a beautiful colorful social life. It is a special form of communication. People share what they are doing at the moment by means of their photo. In 2014, the host of the 86th Academy Awards Ellen DeGeneres took the most popular selfie of Hollywood stars in the history (*Figure 4*). The picture has been reposted more than three million times. Among celebrities there were Bradley Cooper, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Julia Roberts, Jennifer Lawrence and Meryl Streep on this photo with her.



Figure 4. The most popular selfie of Hollywood stars in history.
Source: <https://twitter.com/theellenshow>

So, the selfie photography itself seems to have over 180-year history in which it has reached the enormous extent of about 93 million new selfies taken every brand new day all over the world. In the same time, this so distinctive human practice of self-reflection and self-knowledge can be also inscribed in the century-old art tradition of self-portraits in visual terms, or even in the broader practice of keeping secret (or not so secret) diaries of one's personal everyday/work/intimate/sacral life and habits as a means of self-reflection and deepening the knowledge of one's inner self.

In the first individual selfie described, that one of Robert Cornelius, his main intentions were scientific; in the case of Princess Anastasia, the explicit purpose of her selfie was both self-expression and sharing her presence with her friend, addressee of the photography with the letter accompanying it. We could easily distinguish the different purposes of these two selfies taken; the same demarcation line can be drawn between the 'group selfie' experiment of the professional photographers on a New York roof in 1920 and that one in 2014 by DeGeneres. Moreover, group selfies, or 'groupies', reveal another research issue of importance – that of the limits of individual and collective self-identity in the very act of taking selfies.

But far before the technology era and the digital revolution, people from different habitations and eras had their own selves as one of the central objects of depiction in space and visual arts like cave drawings (*Figure 5.1, 5.2*), especially in the Mesolithic and the Neolithic when people moved their focus from drawing animals and hunting scenes to depicting their own selves, their hands and figures, and their relations with the people and animals around them. Circa 12,000 B.C., a definite turn from 2D to 3D depiction of figures was observed in cave paintings: color, perspective and change in the proportions of figure in motion testify to a radical shift in man's consciousness toward a higher level of self-reflection.



Figure 5.1. Cave drawings of human figures interacting with red deer, jaguar and tapir in scenes that include dancing and hunting – Serra da Capivara National Park, Piauí, Brazil. Dated to: ca. 10,000 B.C.
Source: Niède Guidon / Bradshaw Foundation



Figure 5.2. Cave drawings of hunting men in Magurata Cave, North-West Bulgaria. Dated to: ca. 5,000 B.C.

Source: Vislupus, https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9C%D0%B0%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0#/media/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:Magura_cave_023.jpg

Later on in man's history, the art practice of self-portraiture evolved. Artifacts refer to its first occurrence in Eastern culture, and more precisely, to Scholar-gentleman tradition and Zen Buddhism (Figure 6). It is considered that one of the first Western



Figure 6. Kang Schwang, Self-Portrait, 1782. (Ink and color on silk).

Source: National Museum of Korea



Figure 7. Saint Dunstan prostrating himself against Jesus Christ, Self-Portrait. Dated by: ca. 950.

Source: Glastonbury Classbook (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. F. 4. 32, 2176)

self-portraits was made by the Pharaoh Akhenaten's chief sculptor Bak in 1365 B.C. Plutarch mentions that the Ancient Greek sculptor Phidias had included figures that resembled himself in a number of characters in the Battle of the Amazons sculpture figure on the Parthenon. Also, there are references in written Antiquity classics to painted self-portraits which, unfortunately, have not reached contemporaneity. Middle Ages self-portraits are preserved in illuminated manuscripts: an abbot of Glastonbury and later Archbishop of Canterbury, *post mortem* called Saint Dunstan, created a self-portrait of himself worshipping Jesus circa 950 (Figure 7); a self-portrait of the Benedictine monk, English chronicler and cartographer Matthew of Paris can be seen in his *Historia Anglorum* (ca. 1250 – 1255).

Yet, it was barely the Early Renaissance, in the middle of the 15th century, when the trend of experimenting with self-portraiture in art started to expand as a culture and social practice (Figure 8.1, 8.2) due to the substitution of painting on walls and vellum with painting on flat panels of wood, and raise in the quality and more affordable prices of mirrors. Various examples can be seen in Johannes Aquila's frescos (1378, 1392), the works of Giotto di Bondone (1267 – 1337), Masaccio (1401 – 1428), Benozzo Gozzoli (*Procession of the Magi*, 1459), Sandro Botticelli (*Adoration of the Magi*, 1475), Albrecht Dürer (1471 – 1528), etc. of peculiar interest, already in the field of photography, is Nadar's experiment of *Revolving Self-Portrait* (ca. 1865; just seven years earlier, Nadar became the first aerial pho-



Figure 8.1. Benozzo Gozzoli, *Procession of the Magi*, 1459. (Fragment – self-portrait, fresco). Chapel, Medici Palace, Florence



Figure 8.2. Sandro Botticelli, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1475. (Self-portrait – the first in front, from right). Source: The Yorck Project (2002) 10.000 Meisterwerke der Malerei

tographer ever). It is an indicative fact that the interest in painting self-portraits has not abated to today: in this search, of great significance is the fact that a self-portrait reflects a special and unique moment and look of one's appearance, emotions and even life period expressed on the face, so it is too unlikely, and rather practically impossible, this caption of oneself to be repeated in time.

Nowadays, digital technologies give the vast opportunity to make a unique caption of ourselves more easily, cheaper and often than ever. But, at the same time, the risk of manipulation of our look and image, and last but not least our own identity, by other person is higher than ever too.

2. Constructing, Strengthening, Substituting or Hiding Self-Image, Social Status and Social Roles through the Selfie

Although potentially present from the dawn of Renaissance, there is a very important characteristic of both self-portraiture and digital selfies: whether one paints a self-portrait or take a snapshot of themselves, the exposure of the visual result at the marketplace, in an exhibition or in social media is, indeed, "next level" in self-reflection and self-knowledge since this process already passes through others' look, opinion, worldview and value compasses. Thus selfies available to the public contain one more semiotic plaster added and regulative to self-identity – sometimes enriching it, sometimes hurting it.

In social media, we do not just take a picture of us, we post an image of an "excellent man," "excellent woman", "nice friend", "cheerful tourist", "family man", "caring parent" and so on. As though we take this image off our real life and post it in virtual space, where we should be treated respectfully. The researcher Jennifer Ouellette, author of "Me, Myself and Why: Searching for the Science of Self", says: "Your Facebook page, for example, is one giant statement of self-identity. That's exactly how you want to be perceived. Expressing more clearly, it is one of the forms of your personal performance... I think selfies are certainly a way of saying "Here I am". It is also a kind of mirror that people turn to for the same purposes" (Ouellette, 2014: 236).

Why does a person want to show "himself" or "herself"? It is a desire to show oneself to the world, at the same time to perform it the way a person wants to. A person always looks for the ways for self-realization and self-improvement. A person wishes recognition. But recognition in any type of activity is much more difficult to achieve than to make it with a single click – selfie, and then watch the number of likes. Those who gain a small number of real likes can use on Android and iOS applications to drive up their number in social media sites. Typically, driving up programs offer the ability to get unlimited amounts of likes across all mass social media sites and are an illusion of approval.

Today, the way to self-realization and person's creation runs almost thoroughly through the global network. The Internet is a place of meeting, studying, working,

creating and entertaining. The following motives of virtual self-presentation, according to I.I. Shabshin, are identified:

- dissatisfaction with the real social identity, as a result of which the user creates a perfect Self” or “bad Self”;
- escape from “normativity” of social reality, possibility to play part of a “constant wanderer”, hero or antihero;
- testing a new experience;
- self-determination (Shabshin, 2005: 170 – 171).

The personality’s ability to self-reflection and self-consciousness is so unique that its use as the main key to information about mind and social action is implemented as a consequence of the fact that a person faces the usual obstacles of unconsciousness, or even more serious problems like psychological traumas, of learning something about themselves and uses self-analysis as the main way of invention.

Let us explain the statement mentioned above more precisely:

When knowledge of oneself is in a form directly or in principle inaccessible to consciousness, a situation arises where other means of access are needed. Self-examination includes experiences of reflexive consciousness (Baumeister, 1998): individuals speculate about their experience, assess the content of consciousness and analyze the causes and significance of things. Moreover, personality is often seen as being consciously active in thinking, making choices, achieving goals and initiating actions.

Thus, the choice of ways of action and behavior patterns of a person in everyday life is only “the final result of dialogic communication with himself or herself. And it is not just reflection – a unilateral subjective reflection of the happened fact of thinking, experience, action, it is the presence of opposition points of view on own internal experiences or actions, which can last for a long time. If only the concept of reflection can be dealt to understand the person’s consciousness, then the person’s self-knowledge, the consciousness of his or her self cannot be understood outside the dialogue, because the awareness of the own Self occurs only as a result of the opposition of this Self to another, which is perceived as his other Self, or as You” (Kudashov, 1996: 112).

The first experimental attempt known in that direction is Frances Benjamin Johnston’s *Self-Portrait* (ca. 1896), an image explicitly playing with gender roles (*Figure 9*; cf. Borzello, 1998).

3. Selfie in Virtual Space as a Personal Social Mirror

In our view, people always focus on reflections of themselves and their personal identity in a certain social context – a context in which thoughts and feelings about ourselves are shaped by our belonging to a certain social group. The self-presentation theory, worked out by the American sociologist E. Goffman, focuses on the



Figure 9. Frances Benjamin Johnston's Self-Portrait (as "New Woman"). Dated to: ca. 1896. Source: Frances Benjamin Johnston's collection at the Library of Congress

context of human behavior based on the viewer's impression of action or behavior. The idea he studied and further elaborated in his eminent opus "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1956) is based on the types of the masks people wear as well as the performance of the role people play. Furthermore, the participants' and audiences' roles definitions are quite flexible, as each individual has his or her own experience which regulates their perception of reality (Manning, 1992: 202). Goffman (1959: 259) claimed that, as social beings, people consciously seek for their identity. In addition, the sociologist admitted that the behavior and actions of one person could affect the situation in which others were involved. For example, an individual can manipulate the consciousness of others by presenting themselves in a better way than in reality – as he or she may also direct this situation in the desirable way unpremeditatedly. For example, a fitness fan can publish self-portraits (or 'selfies') of his or her body and other fitness poses to direct the viewer's attention to the aesthetics of human body. Still, in the same time, a viewer can rate this publication either as narcissism, as a desire for social approval, or merely of exteriorized

individual values of one who leads a healthy lifestyle and pays attention to their physical development.

In terms of matter, people have the freedom to create and design an Internet personality that may or may not reflect reality. Social discourse has sensitively and qualitatively changed because of changes in technological processes, online interaction, restructuring the relations between the basic spheres of life and culture, and the civilization progress as a whole. As a result, a great importance is given to the appearance and self-presentation, which on its turn leads the individual to change his or her personal outward and behavioral characteristics according to social attitudes.

4. Toward a Philosophy of the Selfie Photography

What a philosophy of the 'selfie' photography includes in its disciplinary field is philosophy of self *plus* philosophy of social photography. That is why, although the centuries-old Western tradition of philosophy of self, be it consciousness or mind, collective or individual one, social photography, along with the self considered in its outward and behavioral plethora, are relatively new social and culture phenomena dated to the last century and a half.

The title of this section is a tribute to Vilém Flusser's book *Toward a Philosophy of Photography* and the essential photographers' "attempt to find the possibilities not yet discovered within it" (Flusser, 1983: 26). Thus, namely a philosophy of the selfie photography is to fill a gap in contemporary philosophical researches of self and all the possibilities not yet discover in it, respectively. The photographer, neuroscientist and writer Joshua Sariñara pays attention that since Sartre's note of the grave human awareness of the unpredictable future "causes great anxiety (...) because we can't control the future – and then perhaps nothing else as well", then "[T]he selfie may be only pixel deep, but it is a way for us to preserve our sense of self. Selfies are, in a way, their own mirrors: they show our image for the world to see as we want to be seen, and they safeguard against the fear of losing control of our minds and lives. – Selfies, as it turns out, are one of our natural instincts to reduce anxiety" (Sariñara, 2014).

In these terms, capturing one's contextual self on a photography – situated in a certain environment, company, part of the day, etc. – serves, *inter alia*, as one's particle of their long-term memory exteriorized in social media. That is why psychological studies of the last several years start to focus on the so-called 'museum selfie phenomenon' (cf. Kozinets, Gretzel, & Dinhopl, 2017) – selfies are meant to engrave the very being, actuality, uniqueness of our embodied human condition.

Simultaneously with this 'museum function,' digital culture admits just the opposite function of "leakage" of digital objects since, once captured and serving as exteriorized and exposure to the public memory of self, we cannot tell for certain

where our selfies are in the network, or how they are used (Shah, 2015: 88). Here we can observe the practical manifestation of Charles Fourier's 'Cabalist' passion which, "like love, has the property of confounding ranks, drawing superiors and inferiors closer to each other;" for, "the cabalistic spirit is the true destination of man" and the general perfection" of man's world mechanism (Fourier, 2007). What we capture as our Self in selfies is what we let go ethereal in virtual space too, and become part of the human collective self, part of You in E. Levinas' terms, part of 'the radical Otherness' in H. Blumenberg's concept of myth, part of the Freudian 'unconscious mind' or Jungian 'collective unconscious.' In this mode, the act of taking and disseminating one's 'selfie' as a striving for self-discovery appeals to a level of collective impetus in each individual much deeper than Renaissance self-portraiture.

Summarizing this reasoning: the role of technology cannot be denied in the development of the selfie phenomenon, and yet we are more interested in exploring selfies as a way to find one's identity by both individual and social practice. Apparently, the intangible person's desire to belong to a particular group is the explanation for why the production, exchange and posting of information in the digital space, distributed mainly through social networks, has become so popular today. As V. Popova notes in her monograph "Photography as a Road (Journey) to...", "[T]he first travelers as a way and style of life in the history of mankind were nomads – a form of mobile, unidentified culture as opposed to the settled one. And in this sense, nomadism and nomadology become the theoretical equivalent of the road/journey" (Popova, 2018: 13). And the most amazing and even magical in this 'nomadic' journey of identity is that photography, including its 'selfie' variants, via presentation of faces, looks, colors and forms gives us micro details about our inner nature, desires and incentives.

5. Conclusions

Although selfie, to some extent, gives a sense of one's conscious involvement – i.e. it is a photograph that a person consciously takes, and often shows to other people, selfies once published are also a constant reminder that when something enters digital space, it instantly becomes part of the infrastructure of a digital public that every time experiences the original time and place in which the visual object was produced, viewed or spread. Due to this reason selfies may act both as an immediate practice of everyday life and as an object of discourse about how people should represent, document and share their behavior in building their identity. Digital self-portrait on the Internet allows to practice self-reflection, contributes to disclosure of self-knowledge mechanisms, on the one hand. Yet, on the other hand, we should always keep in mind that a certain digital public is our mirror, and this mirror has various specifics, strengths, weaknesses and even distortions depending on the specific social, culture and individual traits of the respective digital public.

In terms of near perspective, this study is considered by the authors as a set of first steps towards building a deeper philosophy-based interdisciplinary and international understanding of the 'selfie' phenomenon in further elaborating and enriching the philosophic, anthropologic, psychological, aesthetic and semiotic discourse around it.

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