

THE SELF (RE)PRESENTATION. SELFIE AS CULTURAL ARTEFACT AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

ANDREEA ALINA MOGOȘ¹

ABSTRACT: The issue of self (re)presentation rose over the time the interest of psychologists, sociologists, art historians and other social scientists. The current study will focus on clarifying the concepts of self-presentation and self-representation using the symbolic interactionism paradigm, and the dramaturgical approach, followed by an overview of the visual self-representations phenomenon in social networking systems. The analysis focuses on selfies as photographic objects (artefacts) and cultural practices.

Keywords: cyber-self, self-presentation, selfie, SNS

“Selfie is the portrait of a moment and an experience”

Gunthert (2015)

The self (re)presentation. Concepts and analytical approaches.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Cooley (1902) coined the concept of the “looking-glass self”, which defines the self as the reflection generated by the ‘generalized other’ that is coupled with

¹ Ph.D. in Sociology and Communication Sciences, Associate Professor at the Department of Journalism, Babeș-Bolyai University, mogos@fspac.ro

that generalized other's' judgment. In Cooley's terms, our sense of self is really our perception of society's evaluation of us. In this process, through imagination we "perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it "(Cooley, 1902:17). The concept of the looking-glass self is based on three elements: first, the self imagines how it appears to others; second, the self then imagines the other's judgment; finally, the self develops an emotional response to that judgment. Thus, the looking-glass self is the result of interaction; it is not static but a continuous process of self-evaluation through the imagined eye of the others.

Mead (1934) equally considers that the self is a social emergent. The social conception of the self entails that individual selves are the products of social interaction and not the logical or biological preconditions of that interaction. It is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity. Mead (1934:139) sees the self as the product of a process in which "one does respond to that which he addresses to another and where that response of his own becomes a part of his conduct, where he not only hears himself but responds to himself". Mead further explained that the self is developed through three activities: *language*, *play*, and *game*. *Language* allows individuals to take on the "role of the other" and allows people to respond to his or her own gestures in terms of the symbolized attitudes of others. During *play*, individuals take on the roles of other people and pretend to be those other people in order to express the expectations of significant others. This process of role-playing is central to the generation of self-consciousness and to the general development of the self. In the *game*, the individual is required to internalize the roles of all others who are involved with him or her in the game and must comprehend the rules of the game. Mead considers that the self has two sides: the "I" and the "me". The

“me” represents the expectations and attitudes of others (the generalized other), and it is the organized set of attitudes of others that the individual assumes. The “I” is the response to the “me,” or the person’s individuality. The generalized other (internalized in the “me”) is the major instrument of social control for it is the mechanism by which the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members. (Mead, 1934:71)

According to Cooley and Mead, through interaction, individuals interpret each other’s language, gestures and actions as symbols; this interaction both reflects and constitutes the self.

Goffman (1956), by using the imagery of theatre, attempted to show how meaning is constructed interactively - the *dramaturgical model of social life*. Similarly to Berger & Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*, Goffman’s work is an attempt at analysing our daily life world from the perspective that all of our actions we perform - and the interpretations and meanings we give to these actions - are fundamentally social in nature. Goffman compares social interaction to a theatre, people in everyday life to actors on a stage, each playing a variety of roles. The audience consists of other individuals who observe the role-playing and react to the performances. The main concepts in the dramaturgical framework are: *performance, setting, appearance, costumes, props, manner, the actor’s front, scripts and Front Stage, Back Stage, Off Stage*.

Performance refers to all the activities of an individual in front of a particular set of observers - «*the audience*». Through this performance, the individual - «*the actor*», gives meaning to themselves, to others, and to their situation. These performances deliver impressions to others and information is exchanged to confirm identity. The actors may or may not be aware of their performance or have an objective of their performance, however the audience is always attributing meaning to it and to the actor. The performance is the

equivalent of the *social role*, which entails a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms and behaviours that a person has to face and fulfil. The model is based on the observation that people behave in a predictable way, and that an individual's behaviour is context specific, based on social position and other factors. The theatre is a metaphor often used to describe role theory.

The *social role* conceptualisation belongs to Mead (1934). The author proposed several categories for the social roles: *cultural roles*, given by culture (e.g. priest); *social differentiation* (e.g. teacher, taxi driver), *situation-specific roles* (e.g. eye witness); *bio-sociological roles* (e.g. as human in a natural system); *gender roles* (as a man, woman, mother, father, etc.). Role behaviour is influenced by the norms determining a social situation, by the internal and external expectations connected to a social role, and the social sanctions (punishment and reward).

The *setting* for the performance includes the scenery, props, and location in which the interaction takes place. Different settings will have different audiences and will thus require the actor to alter his performances for each setting.

The *appearance* functions to portray to the audience the performer's social statuses and gives information about the individual's temporary social state or role, for example whether he is engaging in work (by wearing a uniform), informal recreation, or a formal social activity. Dress and props serve to communicate gender, status, occupation, age, and personal commitments.

The way people dress and what they wear are regarded as *costumes* when using a dramaturgical analysis because the attire is highly influenced on different situations (Eg. Business Suits, Doctor's Lab Coats, Police Uniforms, and School Uniforms.) Costumes are what are most apparent and obvious for first impressions and can show much of the internal thought processes of individuals regardless of the situation.

Props are a big part of a production; they are mainly used as tools for actors to use and abuse while playing their roles. Props can be large or small, but no matter what they are key points in keeping the “story” alive.

Manner refers to how the individual plays the role and functions to warn the audience of how the performer will act or seek to act in role (for example, dominant, aggressive, receptive, etc.). If inconsistency and contradiction between appearance and manner occur, it will confuse and upset an audience. (eg. when one does not present himself or behave in accordance to his social status or position – military man who is crying).

The *actor's front* is the part of the individual's performance which functions to define the situation for the observers, or audience. It is the image or impression he or she gives off to the audience. A social front can also be thought of as a *script*. Certain social scripts tend to become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations it contain. Certain situations or scenarios have social scripts that suggest how the actor should behave or interact in that situation. If the individual takes on a task or role that is new to him, he or she may find that there are already several well-established fronts among which he must choose. Individuals commonly use pre-established scripts to follow for new situations, even if it is not completely appropriate or desired for that situation.

The *scripts* are documented verbal replies and statements that actors say while acting. While most of conversations in life are not premeditated, rather improvised, people that are engaging in conversation have a pretty good idea of what they want to say and how they want the verbal exchange to go overall.

The *frontstage*, *backstage*, *offstage* are three regions, each affecting differently an individual's performance. *The front stage* is where the actor formally performs and adheres to conventions that have meaning

to the audience. The actor knows he or she is being watched and acts accordingly. In *the back stage*, the actor may behave differently than when in front of the audience on the front stage. This is where the individual truly gets to be himself or herself and get rid of the roles that he or she play when they are in front of other people. *The off-stage* is where individual actors meet the audience members independently of the team performance on the front stage. Specific performances may be given when the audience is segmented as such.

Individuals are controlling their behaviour, thus guiding and controlling how others see them. They act different in social settings than alone, so that that can be considered social *con artists* (a person adept at lying, cajolery, or glib self-serving talk; a person adept at swindling by means of confidence games; swindler.)

How people conceptualize and experience self, identity, and social experience is nowadays affected by convergence, mobility, and always-on patterns of use. The dramaturgical approach is challenged, yet functional, because Goffman's perspective helps to make sense about how digital devices and interfaces enable individuals to perform multiple roles on multiple simultaneous stages with a globally distributed range of actual and potential audiences. (Markham, 2013:280) The author explains that in the digital environment the *setting* or '*stage*' may not only be distant from the body of the performer, but may continue the performance without the actor's presence or knowledge. Actions we might have traditionally separated as *public/private* or *frontstage/backstage* are blurred, if not fundamentally imploded.

The cyberself (re)presentation

The cyberself is formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline self. But the cyberself is an emergent product of social interaction in which the self masters the ability to be both the subject

and object of interaction. Robinson (2007:94) explains that in creating online selves, users do not seek to transcend the most fundamental aspects of their offline selves. Rather, they bring into being bodies, personas, and personalities framed according to the same categories that exist in the offline world. Following the same idea, Meza (2015:167) showed how the self-presentation strategies of “gangsta” type individuals on social networks relies on the *frontstage* construction that implies the use of props, a certain setting and appearance (eg. wads, fake heroin or marijuana etc.)

The digital interaction influences presence, self-presentation, and sociality. Certain unique aspects of virtual and networked practice complicate and blur conventional dramaturgic categories such as the individual, the interaction, and the situation. (Markham, 2013:281)

In *Seeing ourselves through technology: How we use selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves*, Rettberg (2014:20) introduces the term *filter* as an analytical term to understand the algorithmic culture of new media: “the filter become a pervasive metaphor for the ways in which the technology can remove certain content and how it can alter or distort texts, images and data.” Filters can be *technological* (Instagram filters, used by search engines, applied to social media feeds), *cultural* (norms, expectations, normative discursive strategies) or *cognitive* (mind’s ability to perceive certain things and not others).

Digital media influences the enactment of self, the interplay of self and other, and the construction of meaning in context. Internet features and digital mobile devices impact how people experience space, place and time, how the self is constructed and presented, how interaction takes place, and how individuals make sense of both local and global situations.

The self-portrait (or the *selfie*) shared on social networks became over the last years one of the most prominent online self-presentation tools. According to Oxford Dictionaries, *selfie* is “a photograph that one

has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.” Over the last few years, the word *selfie* use showed “a phenomenal upward trend” and for this reason, it was declared 2013 Word of the Year. (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013) The increasing popularity of this word is tightly connected to everyday social practices determined by Internet access, mobile devices (mostly smartphones) and the use of social media.

Selfie as a *photographic object*

A selfie is an artefact that enables the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship (between photographer and photographed, between image and filtering software, between viewer and viewed, etc.). Ever since Joseph Nicéphone Niépce succeeded in 1827 to fix the photographic image, photographers around the world were preoccupied to capture their own image in self-portraits:



Self-portrait made by Robert Cornelius (1839)²



Autoportrait tournant, made by Nadar (1865)³

Figure 1 – Famous early self-portraits

² Photograph source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Cornelius

³ Photograph source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nadar_photographer

But the technologies available at that time - big, slow and heavy cameras - were only permitting two types of self-portraits: the ones that were capturing the image reflected in the mirror and the ones made using a wired remote shutter button.

Kodak's Brownie, launched in 1888 - a small camera with a 100 frames roll-film - triggered a revolution in the way pictures were taken and thus led, among others, to a democratization of the portrait, which was not longer made only by few professionals in their studios. Wajcman (2012:25) suggests that technological change is itself shaped by the social circumstances within which it takes place: Kodak invention was quickly adopted by people who were starting to discover holidays and leisure time; women started having access to an easy to operate memory keeping technology.

The more than 100 years that followed the development of photographic processes, techniques and equipment continued. Faster films, smaller and cheaper cameras, better lenses made photography more and more popular. Susan Sontag (1977:8) writes about the popularity of photography in the 70s as a personal practice: "photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing".

Beginning with the 90s, the advent of digital photography, confirmed that some of the cultural conventions of traditional photography remained intact and shaped the reception and use of digital image-making technologies, whereas other aspects have been completely transformed and introduce new modes of creating photographs which rely on interactions between software, file formats and protocols for information exchange that contribute to the meaning and use of photographs. (Hand, 1994:142)

Selfie as cultural practice

Photographic meaning is found in the technical, cultural and historical processes in which photographs are used (Tagg, 1993:118). Thus, digital photographs could be evaluated using concepts like *media convergence*, *connectivity*, *ephemeral* and *performed*. (Bushey, 2014:36)

Bushey invokes the smartphone as an example of *media convergence*. Most smartphones now combine a camera, a phone and a personal computer, which enables the user to transmit and receive data as audio, image and text. Media convergence affects the routine use of different devices and processes at each stage in the creation, management and storage of digital photographs. For example, the real-time viewing option on the smartphone screen has altered the process of taking a self-portrait. Users rely on smartphone screens rather than themselves to compose photos. Elements such as composition, camera angle, depth of field, exposure time play a significant role in the final look of a photograph, but "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." (Wendt, 2014:34)

Photo-sharing and management sites (eg. *Flickr*) are encouraging individuals and organizations to share and manage their digital photographs. In the context of photo-sharing communities and online image making practices, members acting as *producers* do not aim to create a complete product. (Bushey, 2014:39). The social networking platforms are encouraging visual production that can be tagged, rated, shared.

Digital photographs have a short life-span (they are *ephemeral*), because new technologies and social practices are changing the temporality of images, resulting in photography as a form of visual communication (eg. *Snapchat*), but without any expectation of permanence

(Van House cited in Bushey, 2014:41). Images can be made any time, any place and they can be instantly uploaded and shared. But digital images are often seen as both fragile and of short-term interest.

The *performed* practice is expressed in relation to how digital photography is used and the rhetoric of representation. At this point, the dramaturgical approach proposed by Goffman becomes of interest, because “the performance of photography is traditionally considered in relation to the staging of the event in front of the camera prior to image capture, and in relation to the ‘show-and-tell’ of presenting an album of family photographs to another person.” (Bushey, 2014:42)

A selfie is a performative practice, a gesture that can send different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences. This gesture may be modified by “social media censorship, social censure, misreading of the sender’s original intent, or adding additional gestures to the mix, such as likes, comments, and remixes.” (Senft & Baym, 2015:1589) Making, showing, viewing and talking about images are not just (self)representational issues, but they contribute to the ways that individuals and groups enact themselves, and reproduce social formations and norms.

Selfies represent a new way not only of representing ourselves to others, but of communicating with one another through images (Rawlings, 2013). A study made by Van House (2011:131) shows that most of the participants made considered, purposeful use of their online photographic representations, including images of themselves but also friends, possessions, spaces and activities and many treated their online images as expressions of their viewpoint and aesthetics. Though, there is an alternate aesthetics of the *ugly selfie*, which is explained by a form of self-derision (mocking), where aesthetic criteria do not apply. These selfies should be ugly in order to be funny and thus socially successful. (Gunthert, 2015) The famous “duck face” is

considered a selfie posing trend that is to be replaced by the “fish gape” (Markovinovich, 2015), which shows that the visual stereotypes of self (re)presentation change, too.



Duck face selfie⁴



Fish gape selfie⁵

Figure 2 – Cliché selfies

One individual may have the internet multiple identities, which was described by Turkle (1995:14) using the *window metaphor*: “The life practice of windows is that of a decentred self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time . . . The experience of this parallelism encourages treating on-screen and off-screen lives with a surprising degree of equality.” Those individual identities are deeply enmeshed with social identities, because people build their self-representations by linking to others and what they communicate about them.

⁴ Photograph source: <http://fashionandbeautyinc.com/category/selfies/>

⁵ Photograph source: www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/10/14/fish-gape-selfie_n_8296498.html

Selfies have turned into a favoured mode for celebrities to express themselves and communicate with fans and followers. The *celebrity culture* emerging over the past few years, puts on display the "authentic" and "private" persona in celebrity selfies (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2015). Celebrity selfies provide the illusion of being – posed, produced and disseminated by celebrities, who invite us into their private lives. Whereas celebrities seem to have lost control in paparazzi photographs, celebrity selfies suggest that they reclaim control of how, when and where they are depicted.

The celebrity culture affected not only celebrities' behavior, but that of anonymous individuals, too. "Microcelebrity" (Senft, 2013:346), which is a new form of identity, linked almost exclusively with the Internet. People have now access to audiences that were only available to politicians and celebrities, and this affect the identity presentation and the social interactions of the individuals. As a social practice, microcelebrity changes the game of celebrity. In this case, audiences and communities, two groups traditionally requiring different modes of address, blend. Senft (2013:350) considers that "Audiences desire someone to speak at them; communities desire someone to speak with them." Identity, once believed to be the property of the bearer, now belongs to the perceiver. Those who perceive have historically unprecedented opportunities to establish whose identities, communities, and stories will matter to the rest of the world. (idem, 353)

Post-feminist approaches of the self-presentation practices in the digital media era suggest that "the young women themselves often characterize the selfie (on social media sites) as a radical act of political empowerment: as a means to resist the male-dominated media culture's obsession with and oppressive hold over their lives and bodies." (Murray, 2015:490)

But selfies could also reflect diverse psychopathologies, such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy – the *dark triad*. Studies begin to explore the relationships between personality traits and social media use and self-presentation. For example, Fox & Rooney (2015:163) examined the relationship between the SNS use, the selfie posting and the photo editing behavior among a nationally representative sample of U.S. men. They concluded that “men who self-objectify spent more time on SNSs than those lower in self-objectification, and more narcissistic individuals reported spending more time on SNSs. Those higher in narcissism and psychopathy reported posting selfies more frequently. Narcissists and individuals high in self-objectification more frequently edited photos of themselves that they posted to SNSs.”

The digital photograph affordances come with the questioning of what is socially and morally acceptable or what should be reproduced, published and endlessly circulated online becomes questionable, invoking the issues of taste, decency and invariable ethics and morality around imaging. Selfies from funerals and disaster selfies have emerged as genres, invoking the moral censure of the public and the social norms about sacredness of life and death. (Ibrahim, 2016:215)



Figure 3 – Selfie at violent protests⁶

⁶ Photograph source: <http://www.20minutes.fr/web/1561739-20150313-obsedes-photos-reconnaissent-passer-cote-vie>

Gibbs *et al.* (2015:260) analysis identified that many of the #funeral photographs they categorized as selfies were associated with hash-tags such as ‘#likeforlike’, ‘#sexy’, ‘#fashion’, or ‘#follow me’ and seemed to be more about the subject’s self-presentation and self-promotion than an acknowledgment of the solemnity and gravitas of funeral rites. Posing and smiling and inadequate contexts has to deal with attention economy where the self is constantly produced and exhibited. On the other hand, funeral selfies’ functions are to signify and communicate presence (Gibbs *et al.*, 2015:266), and thus share an important event and affective experience to a wider social network. Contemporary funerals are social experiences, and mourners are sharing photographs to create a sense of proximity, connection, and co-presence with friends, family, and acquaintances that may not be present.



Funeral selfie⁷



Nelson Mandela’s funeral selfie
(James Cameron-Helle Thorning-Schmidt – Barack Obama)⁸

Figure 4 – Funeral selfies

⁷ Photograph source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_sIDMzjHeM

⁸ Photograph source: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/10/nelson-mandela-world-leaders-selfie>

Conclusion

Selfies' popularity has had a transformational influence on contemporary culture. Selfies invoke important issues in communication, photography, self-presentation, psychology, and digital media studies. This study provided an interdisciplinary overview of the selfie as both an *artefact* (photographic object) and a *practice*. From these perspectives, *selfies* are connected to concepts such as authenticity, consumption, celebrity and self-presentation, as well as practices of art history, media forms, and self-portraiture.

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