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“I am looking at *Me*”: The Self in a Selfie

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Abstract:

This paper intends to mobilize the ideas of ‘self’ and its representation to look at the culture of taking and sharing selfies in real life and in popular culture. The paper begins with a brief discussion on the theoretical and philosophical co-ordinates of the entity designated as the ‘self’, its constitution and its strategies of representation. Building on the ideas discussed in the first section, the rest of the paper analyses the idea of presenting or ‘selling’ oneself, the role of beauty, gender, power, gaze and the market, and uses the same for understanding the primary narrative in the TV series *Selfie*.

Keywords: Visual Culture, Self, Selfies, Narcissism, Feminist Film Theory, Beauty Myth, Gender, Television, Popular Culture.

The idea of the self has intrigued and exasperated mankind for centuries. “Who am I, really?” Or, as Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature* asks, who is this I that looks for a self? Am I my memories, my personality, consciousness, actions or a sense of coherence that unifies all these as one? Julian Baggini in his book *The Ego Trick: What Does It Mean to Be You?* attempts to answer this question with what is called the ‘Bundle theory of self’ (119). The theory begins with the claim that there is no singular entity (be it our body, brain, memories or acts) that constitutes our self. This is suggested by instances of a sense of the self remaining largely unchanged despite loss/rupture of these components (transgendered and mutilated bodies, amnesia, dementia et al). Baggini’s conclusion follows from this simple syllogism: If it’s not a single thing that makes you who you are, you must be the product of multiple parts and processes working together.

Baggini’s next observation is more interesting: the self, this perceived ‘unity’ is actually the product of the different parts of the ‘system’ working together and not the basis for it (73). Nietzsche’s critique of the unitary human subject works with a similar idea that human beings create not only their reality and world, but also themselves, all the time. Nietzsche deflates the idea of a unified, independent subject behind appearances, essences and actions by calling that subject an effect and a product of interpretation. Once an act has been performed, it’s our erroneous way of looking at it that makes us see a self/subject separate from the act, which, in fact, is nothing but an approximation and a metaphor for the totality of the processes behind the act. “How can we know the dancer from the dance,” asks Yeats in “Among School Children” (64).

Many theorists like Foucault and Butler have claimed that the self is discursively constituted, that is, it is a product of discourses that one participates in and hence is a process rather than a product. Daniel C. Dennett adds an interesting insight to this way of thinking in his book *Consciousness Explained*. He gives numerous examples of how animals develop and maintain a sense of self by demarcating boundaries between their body, their community and the ‘outside’, the ‘other’ (think of snails and shells or spiders and webs). For humans, Dennett, goes on to say, the fundamental technique of self-definition is story-telling – stories about who we are, the roles we play and where we have been. He shares a fascinating anecdote to explain his understanding of the self further. Authorities in New York Harbour used to ask small boat owners lost in fog to turn their boat quickly in a tight circle, so that they can look at the monitor installed on their boats and identify themselves among the many moving blips (other boats) on it. Something similar happens when we want to work with our ‘selves’ – we ‘do’ something and see what happens- we tell stories, we participate in discourses, we take up roles or occupy social ‘fronts’ already in place (Goffman’s term,13). One can cite numerous examples of such an exercise, but sonnet sequences by the Renaissance poets (e.g. *Astrophil and Stella*) and autobiographical poems by the Romantics (e.g. *The Prelude*) are two literary examples that come to mind immediately, where the poet’s persona tries to fashion a sense of his self by going back and forth in time (using memory that is directed towards a past, or a reconstruction thereof) and defining himself as a lover/poet (using desire that is directed towards a future).

One must not suppose, however, that the ‘blip’ we think of as ourselves as we perform an action or participate in a discourse is some unitary entity complete in itself. Like the blip on the monitor in Dennett’s example, the self we usually think of is only a *re-presentation* of the self- for ourselves, for the world.

The idea of a fictitious unity posited by self should remind us of another theory concerned with the development of self- Lacan’s theory of psychosexual development and, especially the Mirror stage in this schema. According to Lacan’s schema of psychosexual development, somewhere around the age of 6-18 months, a child can recognize his own mirror image. From a turbulent, chaotic sense of himself, without any clear demarcations between the world and his self which characterized the Real Order so far, the child transitions to a stage of development where he recognizes an ‘Ideal-I’, a unified and idealized version of itself. This, however, is an instance of ‘méconnaissance’, misrecognition, because the image in the mirror is not really the child, but an image of it, a representation. The fiction of a unified, integrated subject, set apart from the world has been introduced regardless and will persist, as will the ‘ideal-I’. The perfect self in the mirror will set into the motion the entry of the child into the Imaginary order where he will gain an identity defined relationally, by differences and rules; it will also produce in him “an organic insufficiency in his natural reality” – the sense of being incomplete (lack) and an impulse to reach the real, a completeness, a fullness which has been denied to him (desire)- that will drive the subject’s actions through most parts of his life.

At this point, we can sum up our ideas of the self in following points: it is not a singular entity but a result of processes and parts working together to sustain an illusion of unity, which has to be strengthened by narratives we choose to play out and participate in. Produced by and caught in discourses which define its specific social location and forces of lack and desire which impel its development, the self bears a complex relationship to them.

Sexing up the Self: Selfies and Selling

A Buzzfeed article¹ on photography gives us the data from which one can easily infer that we take more photos every few minutes than the entire 19th century. A sizeable portion of these photos fall under what are called selfies, self-taken photographs. One can understand the ubiquitous nature of selfies by looking cursorily at pictures and the most popular hashtags (with #Selfie sitting right at the top) across different forms of social media, number of devices designed specifically for taking better selfies (phones, tablets, phablets, selfie sticks) and a culture (songs, movies, lifestyle magazines, TV shows) which celebrates the act of clicking and sharing selfies. What underlies this obsession of ours?

Narcissism is the short and immediate answer, but one must ask: Is that all there is to it? *The Telegraph* quotes Dr Terri Apter, psychology lecturer at Cambridge University, for an answer:

“It’s a kind of self-definition. We all like the idea of being sort of in control of our image and getting attention, being noticed, being part of the cultureFrom the fifteenth century, at least, people who had access to self-representations were keen to make use of them,” she says. “In this way people could control the image projected, and of course the fact that the image was on display, marked the importance and status of the person represented.”

It’s all about people trying to figure out who they are and *representing* the same for others, says Dr Apter. This craving to be ‘seen’ by others or to present oneself to others through images, actions etc. forms a crucial component of Cooley’s Looking Glass Self Theory (outlined in *On Self and Social Organization*) which states that much of our sense of self is constituted and shaped by our interaction with others, by our understanding of how others perceive us. The desire for controlling that perception and hence one’s self-definition is, however, almost always implicated in the power structures and discourses around us. With selfies, the most potent discourse is that of beauty and the market. Like the illusory ideal-I, or, the perfect images of their own selves Narcissus and Wilde’s Dorian Gray killed themselves for, beauty is an ideal which we can chase ceaselessly but never reach. It is Dorian Gray’s desire for a perfect image, an eternal youth that makes him chase a representation and a fantasy that is not his limited, imperfect self in flesh and blood - “I am tired of myself...I should like to be somebody else”, he says (111). It is not Sibyl whom he rejects in the story but Dorian who “knew nothing but shadows, and...thought them real” (71). In Ovid’s Narcissus in *Metamorphoses* seeks pure perfection in his own reflection. Like Derrida’s pure presence, this pure perfection proves fatal for the desiring self that seeks it.

Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth* warns us about the insidious nature of the myth which tells us that beauty is something objective and universal and must be possessed by all, especially women, for them to matter. She claims that beauty is neither objective nor universal but “a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics” (12). The beauty myth is not about women at all, Wolf asserts, but about the powers and institutions that surround them: “The qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of female behaviour that the period considers desirable. Wolf sees the increasing power of this myth over women as tied with the neo-conservative backlash against women in the face of a strong feminist movement and women gaining more and more freedom and power. The design is both political and financial – to maintain the last bastion of control over women through the beauty myth, and to benefit the capitalist structures that promotes specific ideas and images (made ridiculously easy with the help of new media) of beauty to sell its products.

Wolf notes another interesting and dangerous aspect of the beauty myth. It sells itself through the language of aspirational ideology and meritocracy (“get the body you deserve”, “you can get the body you want” etc.) making it look like if only the individual worked harder, they would succeed, conveniently brushing over the idea of the ideal (beauty) itself being arbitrary and damaging to women. Since the system for the ideal is reductive (much like how it is with wealth, men and capitalism), the ideal hardly bears any relationship to real-life values and satisfaction; one must keep competing and keep pursuing beauty for beauty’s sake, trying to find some glamour, some excitement, some sense of belonging in a game almost everyone seems to be implicated in.

If women are denied any ideals of female beauty, desire and sexuality they would actually prefer and benefit from emulating, and, instead bombarded with images which define these categories in the language of patriarchy and capitalism, they must, ultimately, partake of some of these fantasies; they must crave this beauty defined by others for them. The selfie phenomenon thus seems to posit a liminal space for women: they can control their images and feel beautiful, but much of this satisfaction is controlled by the dominant ideas of beauty around them. Women must try to transcend the beauty myth, Wolf announces in the introduction to *The Beauty Myth*, to make this myth ‘their own’, to take back the freedom to dress up (or not) the way they want, and to feel beautiful as they are. Is this possible anymore, one must ask constantly. We will now examine the case of a TV series *Selfie* to illustrate this problematic.

The TV series *Selfie* is loosely based on George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* and the musical *My Fair Lady*, which, in turn, draw inspiration from the myth of Pygmalion, the legendary sculptor who fell in love with the statue he had fashioned. *My Fair Lady* situates the narrative in Edwardian London, wherein Henry, a phoneticist, trains a flower girl Eliza to be a ‘proper’ lady with all the manners and bearing of one. *Selfie* tells us the story of Eliza, a present-day woman obsessed with social media and selfies, who hires a marketing image guru Henry to revamp her image (*representation*) online and offline.

The ideas of self and representation figure in the narrative right from episode 1. Both Eliza and Henry ‘sell’ or (re)present themselves for their ends; the difference comes in through

their genders. Eliza's goal is to be more popular and beautiful in the eyes of her followers on Instagram, while Henry is referred to as a 'packaged product' in the episode "Hell has Two Bars" when he tries to impress his boss using his knowledge and expertise for a promotion. Wolf talks about this difference in expectations for men and women, the idea of constant surveillance which women have to face and cites John Berger's ("Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.") to explain why women in general seem more obsessed with the ideas and models of beauty than men (59). Eliza's call for help from Henry can be seen as her unconscious admission of defeat at the hands of exhausting and dissatisfying ideas of beauty and popularity. By the end of the first season (the series was cancelled abruptly and the story stops here), Eliza's self is a site and product of conflict between the ideas prescribed by the beauty myth and Henry's conception of desirable behaviour for a lady. The fact that Henry is a marketing representative who agrees to make Eliza "more presentable in real life" should give us pause. Eliza has traded one regime of acceptable representations (selfies and other ways in which one represents herself on social media) for another (the idea of female beauty, behaviour and grace approved by Henry). In both the cases, she is constructed as an object of desire for a socially constructed gaze that is often gendered as 'male'.

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Laura Mulvey deconstructs the ways in which the cultural unconscious of a patriarchal society structures its visual narratives and texts, in the process inviting the audience to identify with the male hero and constructing the female characters as objects of desire. Offering a psychoanalytic analysis of this trend, Mulvey argues that such representations are the result of a strategy of compensation. Beset by a castration anxiety triggered by a female without the phallus, the viewing subject resorts to either voyeurism and the scopophilic pleasure it produces (closely examining the female body for the lack that induced the castration anxiety) or fetishism (assigning the female body a disproportionate and exaggerated aesthetic attention and value to divert attention from the fact of castration, the lack). Complex strategies of identification (with the perfect and glamorous male hero on the screen, much like the ideal mirror image of Lacanian mirror stage) and distancing (so that the female character can be carefully examined as an object by the viewing subject) make these possible. Of course, as Mulvey added in a later essay, the permutations and "oscillations of desire" possible for a female viewer are automatically increased as she can oscillate between these gendered/desiring positions simplistically designated as male/active and female/passive.

If Eliza's selfies are often meant to represent her as the desirable woman of a male fantasy, her "reformed" behaviour in real life choreographed by Henry look like the exaggerated masquerade of femininity² that the female subject often stages to deny any ambiguity or threat that arises from their socially unacceptable possession of 'masculine' traits and desires. Eliza manages to break free from both these regimes of representation when she breaks up with a colleague Freddy (who was only treating her like an "office trophy" and a "booty call") and waits for Henry to come to her on his own as she decides to embrace her former awkward, imperfect self) from high school (as opposed to the highly rehearsed and edited self that she used to perform on social media).

In the episode “I Woke up Like This,” Eliza gives us possible explanations for her obsession with ‘looking good’ and clicking selfies. Throughout her teenage years, Eliza felt she was ‘invisible’, overshadowed by the ‘cool girls’ in her class and an elder sister who was a better performer. This, Eliza tells us, is her way of being seen, being somebody, being in control. It will be a futile and dangerous exercise to generalize from Eliza’s narrative here, but her explanation does provide one of the perspectives through which one can look at the selfie culture.

Taking and sharing selfies is an exercise in self-definition and power. One can be in control, for instance, when someone like Jaime Raines takes a selfie every day³ for three years to show his transition from male to female and to (re)present his preferred gender to himself and to the world, or, when campaigns are built around people clicking selfies for a cause (say, moral policing), or, simply because in the case of selfies, one can choose the perfect lighting and angle for themselves, click as many pictures as one wants and decide which ones to post on social media. The luxury of self-portraits reserved for the select elite in history suddenly seems to be within the reach of the masses. However, one can also be required to participate in and submit to the hegemonic power structures already in place, for instance, when most women seem to click selfies with similar poses (pout, side-look, squint etc, all too familiar for those who have been looking at the beauty myth and sexualisation of women for the heterosexual male gaze and desire), and everyone has to choose from limited filters on Instagram and follow the guidelines for social media (telling them what is cool or okay to post and what not). One is free to think that the self can be represented the way one wants but the script of representation is substantially predetermined. The hegemonic system, as Stephen Greenblatt has asserted, will provide strategies for subversion, but knows too well how to contain and appropriate subversion for its own ends and perpetuation.

Taking selfies can be understood as one of the ways we try to (re)present ourselves to the world, and to our own selves. The exercise might make us feel in control, help us understand and project who we are but, like other exercises in self-definition, is almost always informed by the dominant ideas around us – beauty, gender, power, class and culture. It would be interesting to examine these ideas for areas where conventional perspectives on gender, power and history don’t work – people of alternative genders and sexualities, regions where matrilineal and (approximately) matriarchal community structures exist and countries which were removed from the stages in history (industrial revolution, world wars, 1960s sexual revolution and the different waves of feminism, rise of the liberal arts and neo-conservatism) through which we have to come to understand the evolution of our civilization, culture and its myths, including beauty.

¹Schwarz, Hunter. “How Many Photos Have Been Taken Ever?” BuzzFeed.com. BuzzFeed, Inc. 24 Sept. 2012. Web. 30 Oct. 2015.

² "Womanliness as Masquerade". Riviere, Joan

³Strudwick, Patrick. "This Trans Guy Took A Selfie Every Day For Three Years To Show How His Face Changed". BuzzFeed.com. BuzzFeed, Inc. 7 Oct. 2015. Web. 30 Oct. 2015.

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