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Selfie and the experience of the virtual image

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Don't cry, I'm sorry to have deceived you so much, but that's how life is.

— Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

Abstract

People know the world through images; new realities are created and new identities are developed. Consequently, portraits may become a representation of one's personality and a reflection of the society of spectacle. These digital pictures change the experience of memory and inherently trace back to photographs. Thus, the "screen" mediates the relations among people and the information flow carrying different meanings. In this way, the photographic material and the virtual image will be analyzed, and distinctions will be noted regarding the aesthetic experience, specifically regarding the self-portrait and the selfie.

Keywords: *Photography, virtual image, selfie, self-portrait, and aesthetic experience.*

The photographic image

Images are the core of society today; they have become the means of massive communication and, therefore, the essence of daily life. Humans have become *homo photographicus*. Almost every person has a camera, whether it is in a cellphone, iPad, tablet, point and shoot or any other device. People have learned to express emotions, ideas and concepts through images regardless of its complexity.

Photos may be digital images but not every image is a photograph. In this section, the photographic image will be considered as a print, different from the virtual image, based on their structure, materiality and distribution.

In general, the image is defined as a figure, the representation of something. That is, the copy of an object, a mental representation subject to cognition and interpretation. In that regard, Flusser (2001) writes about images as containers of signified meaning, as an abstraction of something projected into time and space. From ancient cultures and civilizations, the copy made of an object represents that entity along with other attributions given by individuals or a group. In that way, a symbol is created.

Pictures are a means to transmit ideas and even knowledge, since they are the bases of visual communication and they are also a cultural product.

When an artistic representation (drawing, painting, engraving) of an object is made, there is a certain distance between the copy and the original due to skills and techniques used by the author. This is what makes the art unique and provides an aura as

Benjamin stated in 1936. However, upon the arrival of photography and the reproducibility of images, this gap is reduced to such an extent that the object depicted may be taken as the object itself conveying its authenticity. In this way, sight is the preferred sense emphasizing that *seeing is believing*. The image is proof of the subject's existence, "it has been" as Barthes affirms, undeniably in a specific time and space.

However, the object portrayed no longer subsists, the photograph becomes a testimony, an index of a former event. Then, the picture has a diachronic relationship with the beholder, who has a memory and builds an emotional connection based on something that only exists in the past. In that regard, the image retains significance over time as if it were a ghost, the meaning remains on the surface. In fact, Brea argues that it (the material-image) remains static as a result of their production process in which there is a specific and unique time lapse (Brea, 2010; 113). The material photograph is always in delay, "it has been" and the significance is retrieved through diachronic memories.

Before the appearance of the virtual image, photographs (and previously painted portraits) were consumed, generally in a more intimate context, for example in a private album or they were displayed in the family room. The aesthetic experience was closer to a painting and according to Moxey (2013), the meaning was clear, that is, the viewers easily appreciated the significance since the portrait was conceived for a particular audience in a certain time. In contrast, virtual pictures are distributed in a different way and have diverse spectators.



Fig.1 Hippolyte Bayard, 1840

The material images, under their production scheme, are prone to depict the world as a canvas, the medium determines how people look, read signs and tell stories. Additionally, the narratives are considered to be truthful because, in order to photograph an object, it has to exist; it has a referent, contrary to painting, where the artist may create chimeras based on imagination.

Nonetheless, the veracity of a picture may be questioned since it could be staged or transformed into something else, even something that is not as it appears in reality. For example, a portrait may be an idealistic version of a person, an alter ego or simply not the subject as known in daily life. To illustrate further, the case of Hippolyte Bayard becomes interesting to mention. In 1840, Bayard photographed himself as a drowned man, and people who saw the picture believed it was real. At the time, these images were believed to be real because a mechanic device, a camera, had taken them. In this way, Bayard created an alternative reality, where he was found dead.

In the 19th century people may have been keener to be deceived, but what happens when images are mass created? Presently, the sense of unreality is inherent and it is harder to believe that the subject “has been” the way it is portrayed.

Experiencing the virtual image

First, the concept of *virtual* must be defined or redefined because it has different meanings. The connotation more often used, is related to computing, as a kind of storage or coded information flow in the cyberspace, that is to say in a place with no physical form. The virtual image is constituted by a numeric language that can only be read by an electronic device, whereas, the photographic image has a material structure.

To be more precise, the term originates from the Latin *virtus*, which signifies virtue or strength in the sense of power. In this way, the concept is conceived as a potential, as a possibility or capability. Hence, the virtual image has diverse possibilities; it may be able to become something different from the original subject or be enhanced.

On the other hand, the virtual has been opposed to reality, becoming synonymous with *false* and *deceptive* as if it were an illusion or a reflection in a mirror (Ryan, 2004:45). In that regard, Baudrillard (2012) argues that the virtual image is a place where the referent disappears because it is no longer about imitation or repetition, but is a replacement of reality. In other words, the original is not recognized, there is no distinction between the original and the duplicate. The virtual indicates that something is nearly true and in certain cases it is taken as the truth.

According to Baudrillard, society today is immersed in a virtual reality where the referents are being misplaced or forgotten and the virtual image may be an idealized depiction of the subject. As a result, the picture becomes a hyper realistic representation, an enhanced version of the physical object that is transformed into an overexposed body image (Diodato, 2011).

Furthermore, in contemporary culture, objects are desired and possessed at the hand of reproduction. Concurring with Sontag (2006), it is a time when people want to embrace and own the world through images, in this case, virtually. Consequently, the massive propagation of pictures undermines their aura and the singularity of the original

object now escapes reality. In addition, these images serve as a cultural and economic product of capitalism, in the sense that they are consumed and disposed with such promptness that the aesthetic experience and significance are transformed.

As mentioned previously, the material photograph is static and has diachronic relations with the viewer. In contrast, the virtual is performative and anachronistic. Performative since it is presented every time when its numeric code is read. It recreates the subject in the present and weakens the trace of the memory. While the photograph embodies what “has been” in the past, the virtual “is”, it exists in an eternal present. Therefore it is anachronistic; the interpretation is not linear in time because it occurs in different layers at the same moment, or even more, out of time. There is no need to recall an event in order to give meaning to the image. Since it does not have a specific sequence, there is no history and the narrative may take different directions. Thus, the virtual becomes a good example of postmodern or posthistoric society where the metanarratives are substituted by numerous stories. “A characteristic of the now is its heterochrony, a vision of human history as constituted by multiple temporalities” (Moxey, 2013: 42). Here, heterochronicity is the absence of time, the anachronistic quality.

Moreover, the images are present without a physical matter, which enables them to be ubiquitous, they are observed by a diverse public. Instead of having a transparent property, the pictures are opaque (Moxey, 2013: 77). That is, the significance is not clear as the reading depends on the audience; the cultural background and personal stories establish the course of the interpretation. The role of memory at this point is unstable; it recalls little, if anything. Memory also forgets fast and is incapable of fulfilling the future (Brea, 2010; 1442). That is why every present moment is highly valued and is intertwined in a non-linear narrative, but instead in a rhizome of open and endless possibilities.

From the self-portrait to the selfie

A self-portrait is not the same as a *selfie*; there is a difference in their origin. The first is a genre, born during the Renaissance, and the second, is a product of the 21st century.

In the past, if a portrait were desired, people would look for an artist or a professional photographer. However, not every person could afford the commission of a picture. Needless to say, with the advanced technological quality of small, inexpensive cameras and other devices with a built in camera, photography has been democratized. Consequently, the painter is not necessarily required in order to have a photograph of one's self.

However, a portrait or self-portrait made by an artist may lead to a more complex practice, since the examination of the subject is deeper and often, there is a pre-conceptualization on how the artwork should be perceived and experienced by the beholder.

On the other hand, the definition of a *selfie*, given by the Oxford dictionary, is as follows: *a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media*. Thus, to produce a selfie it is not critical to have any artistic skills or use complicated signs and symbols.

The differences between a self-portrait and a selfie are not solely in the manner they are produced but in the way they are structured, distributed and acknowledged by society. To illustrate the concepts explained previously, the selfie will be referred to as a *cybernetic image*, since it generally stays in a digital format, while the self-portrait could be observed as a material photograph as well as a virtual image. Either way, the experience may be somewhat different due to the inner organization and place in time and space.

As noted before, the photograph was related with a private practice and a linear interpretation. However, the interest in making the intimate moments public has been increased by the use of new media. Privacy has become a controversial issue; some individuals want to protect themselves from the indiscrete gaze, and yet information is fed into the system by a third party, arguing that is best for the functionality of certain services.



Fig. 2 Couple's selfie.



Fig.3 Woman's selfie



Fig. 4 Persephone. Self-portrait. Elizabeth Mireles

Further, curiosity is part of human nature; people want to know the person portrayed, and how he or she lives in reality. The screen is the window of the voyeuristic being. It allows people to be seen and see others with anonymity.

For instance, the Spanish artist, Joan Fontcuberta, had an exhibition named “A través del espejo” (*Through the looking glass*), where he presented selfies retrieved from the web. There is an obvious association with the Lewis Carroll novel, as the artist states an analogy between the mirror and the camera. The glass presents a reversed world for Alice, meanwhile, the camera originally operated with a mirror to invert the image. In other words, in both cases it is a game of perception and deception.

In the same way, photography is not entirely objective, and still the viewer acknowledges the referent. However, the seduction of the selfie lies in the attraction towards the overexposed, the hyper realistic version of a person. In addition, it validates the presence of the subject; he or she exists right now and wants to be observed and approved by others. The portrait is ephemeral and lacks deeper meaning, which is the perfect crime of banality (Baudrillard, 2012: 17). The medium in this case, is part of the message, since the speed of the information flow does not allow for a long contemplation. As a result, the aesthetic experience is outweighed by the numerous images, and the beholder is unable to grasp the true identity and history of the subject. Besides, the selfies have similar elements: the arm that reaches out to the camera, the position of the face, the pose depicting happiness or even sensuality. In brief, generally, the picture represents the best of people.

In contrast, the self-portrait has more layers of meaning. The person that creates a portrait often shows an inner psyche or questions the roles imposed by society. Despite the fact that the image can also be virtual, it is not mass-produced, as it does not imitate the same patterns in terms of composition. In addition, the intention may be distinct due to the inclusion of diverse signs and symbols. Overall, the aesthetic experience requires more attention to detail. Also, if the self-portrait were created analogically, such as a painting or a print, the interpretation would take place differently from the digital layout. So, the audience of the latter is a heterogeneous group with multiple readings and levels of engagement that constitutes a new collective. However, the new bond is only registered in the virtual space.

Final Considerations

To summarize, portraits are not a new practice, what is different is that they are no longer in the art realm. After the democratization of photography, anyone with a camera is able to take a picture. In general, images are fictitious, no one denies their subjectivity and falsification capability.

However, the significance of the process of the (material) photographic image takes place through a diachronic and linear development. The picture is static, a former event that occurred prior to the time the beholder and the moment was captured. It already happened, the image is the testimony of the past. Thus, the viewer has to recall certain memories to reconstruct history or tell a personal story.

On the other hand, the virtual image is anachronistic since it performs in a present interval every time the code is read. It has a singular language and it presents itself in a

particular time and space. Problems in translation and interpretation may occur since syntax differs, nonetheless, this suggests a variety of meanings, a series of micro stories instead of metanarratives. Contemporary culture is centered on the individual more than on the community.

Images are consumed by the desire of the eternal present, and in the end, people do not want to become part of the past; that would deny their existence, meaning absence or death.

The mass reproduction of objects, images included, is the trace of modernity; it has become a global cognitive process. Nevertheless, the postmodern legacy is the rapid production and disposal of visual culture, stories and meaning. The selfie has served as an attempt to answer some questions about the changes within an esthetic experience, where time is important in order to discriminate diverse layers of significance. It has also reasserted the hyper realistic quality and need for recognition in the society of spectacle. While selfies evoke validations through social media, self-portraits look for the construction or even deconstruction of identities and social roles across different interpretations.

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