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Selfies and the Self

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Summary

Film cameras made it possible for individuals to present themselves to others, to assume and feel agency, also to change it, to utilize agency to claim participation in diverse collectivities. Most recently, digital cameras have presented their users with astonishing ways to encourage but also to disseminate diverse acts of agency. In this paper the author proposes to bring to the fore the selfie (an emerging sub-genre of portraiture) as a new cultural product responsible for mediation, production, and transmission of subjectivities in the global mediascapes. Framing the subject in ways which defy ennobled aesthetic principles of photography, its cultivated artistry, selfies reconfigure and adapt ways the subject represent and understand themselves. This paper argues that selfies create visual spaces of novel modes of selfhood, of its certification and assertion.

Keywords
selfie, identity, technology, self-portraiture, reciprocity

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Technological and cultural shifts reinforce new ways of "doing" identity. Multiplying rapidly online and offline categories and types of identities prompt questions about what identity is at this moment of transition enabled by digital media, how it is constructed and consumed, and how it keeps changing[1]. Especially the practice of visual self-portrayal, the taking and sharing of selfies, though it adheres to well-established forms of self-representation like self-portraiture, shapes not only what is visible as far as identity goes but also what we make of emerging terms of identification. Unquestionably, such phenomena as the increasing fondness for photography, growing literary sensibility of photography as well as the hybridization of photography and literature contribute to our understanding of self--expression and self-representation. In the twenty-first century, photography is becoming new literature in which emphasis is shifting from "what can be *said* either by words or images- to what is *done*, *happening*, or *produced*"[2].

A desire for mobile media was already felt in the late nineteenth century in the outburst of interest many people exercised first with *cartes-de-visite* and later with easy-to-use-cameras. The craze, bringing to mind the most recent enthusiasm for selfies, was based on the appeal of the spontaneity in presentation of the body. Without the retouching techniques of the flattering painterly portraiture, visiting cards produced by Camille Silvy, the master of the form, allowed modern dress and appurtenances. Recognizability of the subject's face, portability, and sheer exchange value of these pocket-size cards possessed an "unfailing charm"[3] for the sitters. However, multiply-reproduced, democratic, and cheap, *cartes-de--visite* advertised a "public self, not a private condition"[4]. They belonged in the realm of the "vulgar, leveling and literal"[5] portraits, not the intimate snapshots. Today's selfie makers are not imitators of old masters of the early photographic rhetoric. They are not even *flaneurs*, detectives or amateur journalists secretly looking to capture an isolated or accurate subject. A survey commissioned in 2013 showed that nearly half of all U.S. adults have taken selfies and that 80% of those who do, share them publicly[6]. Celebrities, popes, politicians, young adults, women and men turn their network cameras toward themselves. We can identify the selfie as one of the most frequently taken types of images. Its maker is the every person at

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1 Anna Poletti, Julie Rak, *Identity Technologies*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2014, p. 1.

2 François Brunet, *Photography and Literature*, Reaktion Books, London 2013, p. 108.

3 Cecil Beaton, *Britian in Pictures*, William Collins, London 1944.

4 Graham Clarke, *The Photograph. A Visual and Cultural History*, Oxford Paperbacks, Oxford 1997, p. 51.

5 Joanne Lukitsh, *Julia Margaret Cameron and the Ennoblement of Photographic Portraiture*. In: *Victorian Scandals. Representations of Gender and Class*, Ohio University Press, Athens 1992, p. 215.

6 Selfie survey, www.picmonkey.com [accessed 14.01.2015].

the ready to assert their subjectivity and to share it. Manipulating between constraints and designed affordances of the mobile phone camera, users are able to produce images which are both conventional and distinctive, which are both intimate and public. Camera phones, despite some early limitations like fixed focus and small sensors, are now equipped with diverse tools like retouching apps, affordances which offer possibilities for developing personal photographic practices. One of the most advanced cameras, Nokia Lumia 1020, for example, comes with aesthetic features like face detection, special texturing, geotagging, stitching, and even Carl Zeiss optics. Latest accounts report that selfie users can even wear their selfies. A newly launched service Picatoo "transforms Instagram photos into temporary inkings that can be worn wherever you like on your body". Such "Insta-tats" are free and shipped anywhere in the world[7].

Responding to the genre issue of the selfie as a type of image disseminated in diverse sharing services, I believe that selfies can bring insights about identity and about its limits. First of all, selfies are a product of culture and its dynamics. As Anna Poletti and Julie Rak rightly observe, "changes in technology have always meant changes to the idea of the self"[8]. The selfie means also a change to the idea of portraiture, to ways of revealing and creating subjectivity. Poletti and Rak are sure that the selfie "works to give the writer access to certain kinds of power and knowledge formations which were not available to him or her before"[9]. Whether we study selfies in isolation or as reiterative practices embedded in the order of, for example, visual diaries, we notice how more than ever "identity work is both a work of mediation and remediation between technology and life"[10]. The links between the history of media and renditions of self are strong and determined by a host of factors. They are influenced by other images available in the media landscapes, affordances of equipment used, intended audiences but also the specific ways in which selfie-takers choose to represent or fashion themselves.

The selfie is a new cultural product responsible for mediation, production, and transmission of subjectivities in the global mediascapes. Though studies on selfies have only recently started emerging, skeptics in us are still somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of the selfies as something deserving reflection, we cannot deny that the selfie is a distinctive and potentially potent form of self-expression. The word itself promotes more than ease and freedom. "Selfie" is a photograph "taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social

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7 Rachel Reilly, *Now You Can Wear Your SELFIES*, MailOnline, article 2921575 [accessed 22.01.2015].

8 Anna Poletti, Julie Rak, *Identity Technologies*..., p. 20.

9 Ibidem, p. 6.

10 Ibidem, p. 20.

media”[11]. The *OED* thus defined the word in 2002 and, in 2013 the word “selfie” became the word of the year, a designation which clearly points to the prominent and diversified nature of this transnational tool, less so to a specific nature of the selfie. Many bloggers like the colloquial, cool appeal of the word, a sense of the familiarity and concision that it carries. In an attempt to explain possible meanings attached to the word *selfie*, media psychologist Pamela Routledge proposes to think about the suffix “-ie” as a sort of diminutive connoting “affection and familiarity”, not a “larger expression”. Indeed, most English dictionaries define the suffix “ie” as pointing to the quality of triviality and inconsequentiality. On the one hand, Routledge indicates that the semantic perspective may suggest a “little self” and thus only an “aspect of an identity”[12]. On the other hand, the diminutive may also allude to “the little photograph”, less so to a definite image of the self. Read in this way, the word *selfie* “speaks to the sense of immediacy, insignificance and impermanence of a single photo”[13]. It is very likely that users will conflate these meanings of the word in the future and that the word will survive despite popularity of alternative terms such as a “sweet photo”.

Mapping the facets of new visuality coming to being as a result of the ever-growing dependence on the new phone cameras, photographer and media critic Brooke A. Knight notes that photography is moving away from documentation to performance[14]. Since its appearance in 1997, the point-and-shoot phone camera has become elevated to a status of an indispensable personal object, a “naturalized object of our everyday being”[15]. This most recent camera defines our everyday life, presented in Knight’s study as life marked by “expectation of photographing”[16]. Equipped with phone cameras, we are all photographers, all participants[17], “part of the event”[18], always eager and ready to take pictures. The ease and pleasure of “snapping and sharing” contributes to what Knight identifies as the “heightening of the performative aspect of image making”[19]. The compact and affordable camera phone empowers its user, “gives the photographer agency in any situation, gives her voice, regardless of (but always

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11 www.oxforddictionaries.com [accessed 15.12.2014].

12 Pamela Routledge, *Making Sense of # selfies*, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media [accessed 4.02.2015].

13 Ibidem.

14 Brooke A. Knight, *Performative Pictures. Camera Phones at the Ready*. In: *New visualities: New technologies: The New Ecstasy of Communication*, ed. J. Macgregor Wise, Hille Koskela, Ashgate, Burlington 2013, p. 154.

15 Ibidem, p. 162.

16 Ibidem.

17 Ibidem, p. 168.

18 Ibidem, p. 162.

19 Ibidem p. 155.

influenced by) context"[20]. Hence the selfies, though we realize that they are not the only types of images compulsively taken by camera phone operators. Knight distinguishes six interesting categories of camera images: "the Citizen-Journalist video, the Low *Res* as High Art Piece, the Always-at-Hand Camera, the Because it Was There Picture, The Shot to Share, the Image as Part of Memory"[21]. On the web images of this kind provide a strong surround for selfies. It is tempting to think of these images, in the words of Susan Sontag, as "not just a record but an evaluation of the world"[22].

Selfies make visible where and how we are and what we look like. One of the main signatures of selfies is the exaggerated arm of the image maker extended to hold the smart camera. Captured in the image together with the face of the image maker, the apparatus features as both the similarity and the difference, as the *other body* in the image; its presence marks the increasing importance of the camera, its increasing symbolic binding with our bodies. Selfies show that the camera has become an indispensable prosthesis of the body, its extension interfaced with our eyes. Media archeologist Erkki Huhtamo notes that cameras are not just and simply portable media, but overt "wearable media", attached to us like "clothing, jewelry or a wallet"[23]. Exposed to the gazes of others, the camera phone has become a highly personalized imaging device we wear and trust with information to mark all our personal trajectories.

This presence of the camera in the image signals a new way of life characterized by an urgency to take the self out, to push outward, to share the experience of the here and now, no matter how banal and distorted. It seems our mobile and contingent identities are always camera-ready. The fact implies not only a strong belief in the power to be able to see and record. For many observers, the camera in the image is a companion capable also of violence which, as Donna Haraway observes, is always in one way or another "implicated in our visualizing practices"[24]. To see a series of revealing selfies taken on a visit to a bathroom and tagged "went to the bathroom, took 36 photos" may give us a sense that, indeed, selfies do violate accepted social norms of self-presentation. Making even our most intimate locations and emotions visible and objectified, selfie makers assert the power to see, to make visible, to force and evaluate what they see. Haraway's illuminating perspective offers hints as to the direction our reflection on the significance of the view taken from an empowered

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20 Ibidem, p. 163.

21 Ibidem, p. 156.

22 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, FSG, London 1979, p. 88.

23 Erkki Huhtamo, *Pockets of Plenty*. In: *The Mobile Audience. Media Art and Mobile Technologies*, ed. Martin Rieser, Rodopi, Amsterdam–New York 2011, p. 35.

24 Donna Haraway, *The Persistence of Vision*. In: *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicolas Mirzoeff, Routledge, London 1998, p. 680.

and always complex body can take: "technologies are ways of life, social orders, practices of visualization. Technologies are skilled practices. How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with?"[25] These questions bear on functions of selfies as testimonials to presence in a changed environment, a change informed by desire for both reciprocity and immediacy.

We expect the selfie to be more revelatory than creative. Professional photographers recommend that the selfie should be "cutsie and fun so as to convey the message that your selfie was taken on a whim"[26]. The ease with which the selfies are taken and shared with other netizens enhances the desired quality of immediacy. Intimate visual presence posted as soon as it is shot is keyed to the personal nature of these images. Psychologists identify certain emotional gains which come not just with shooting but also viewing selfies. Routledge explains that "we are hard-wired to respond to faces… It's unconscious. Our brains process visuals faster, and we are more engaged when we see faces. If you're looking at a whole page of photos the ones you will notice are the close-ups and selfies"[27]. Routledge defends selfies as a mode facilitating identity exploration and social integration. She emphasizes the fact that we are never present to ourselves and hence linking to other bodies, even without explicit communication function, creates intimacy which is conducive to the process of gaining self-knowledge. Sharing the images is a proactive function. Constructing connectedness, responding to images of others, with their approval, we learn how others see us, and this is "one of the most effective ways to know yourself"[28]. Digital connectivity offers new meanings also to viewers. By responding, they engage in texturing and positioning these new images of subjectivity. As Smith and Watson notice, such dynamic exchanges, are not dependent on direct or corporeal encounters. They belong to "new kinds of virtual sociality" characterized by "perpetual formation and reformation"[29]. It cannot be denied that the process of formation occurs prior to an encounter. Posting a selfie, we present a close-up, an image in front of a viewer; by tagging the image we brand it, thus influencing thoughts of others, their judgment and response.

Selfies are taken by subjects who think of themselves as agents, unique, conscious, capable of change, of contradiction, and performance. They take selfies for others to see and recognize

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25 Ibidem, p. 681.

26 Tori Telfer, *How to Take a Selfie*, www.bustle.com [accessed 21.10.2014].

27 Daniel Menaker, *Taking Our Selfies Seriously*, "The New York Times", 23.11.2014.

28 Ibidem.

29 Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, University of Minessota Press, Minneapolis 2010, p. 77.

that as agents can render themselves in any way they wish to appear. The selfie privileges appearance, partial vision, multiplicity. It is about the "as-if", "what-if", and "how-about" of identity realized through accretion. Immersed in a peculiar sense of thereness, a selfie, to use Donna Haraway's words, "is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another"[30]. Addition and serialization do not promise connection or fusion but splitting, invention, and mobility. Opening space for highly alluring "identity tourism"[31], the selfies challenge stability. With selfies, identity cannot be defined in terms of any cumulative effect but rather as heterogeneous multiplicities, external traces contained and enfolding in media.

As cultural shapers, selfies direct us into changing concepts of identity and society. Growing archives of Instagram and such compelling projects as Selfiecity give an idea of a large number of different sub-genres of selfies (for example, 'stylies' or selfies reflecting platforms on which they are posted). The subject of the selfie is the one taking the picture, posing often in a self-absorbed abandon, posing against an identifiable and acknowledged backdrop. Taken in all possible places and spaces, selfies constitute new regimes of space, transforming our vision and ways of seeing. We take selfies in domestic, intimate, and in public space. The possibilities are endless and so are the varieties of selfies made *in situ*. There are everyday sites but also serious sites like concentration camps, Ground Zero, Vietnam War Memorial or Chernobyl. Selfies taken in those places are often posted with hashtags emanating the disturbing "feel good" sense, a concreted presence. One of the most intensely criticized selfies, taken by Breanna Mitchell, an Alabama high school graduate in Auschwitz, was tagged "With My Besties in Auschwitz"[32]. The selfie captures a radiant student not in a moment of some reflection on a "larger picture", not in a moment of trying to place herself in a context, deemed elsewhere by her as personally significant. In the selfie, the viewer could see her as a happy young adult trying to testify to her presence without any will to order that place, to having been *in*, and yet despite, the place. Casting this coordinate of her identity, she did not anticipate her imagining would upset so many viewers. The death threats she received after having posted the selfie, made her remove it from her FB account. Mitchell, however, also acknowledged on numerous accounts that the selfie got her the attention she desired. This infamous selfie, its distribution, embedding, reception and removal, revealed location as vulnerablility, as space resisting finality. It revealed also certain limits of what in the eyes of, after all, attentive viewing public identity can be.

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[30] Donna Harawey, *The Persistence of Vision*..., p. 681.

[31] Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes. Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, Routledge, London 2002, p. 31.

[32] Ruth Margalit, *Should Auschwitz be a Site for Selfies?*, "The New Yorker", 26.06.2014.

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Selfies a podmiot

Streszczenie

Selfie, znane również jako „selfik" czy „słiftfocia", jest nowym rodzajem wizerunku, „autoportrecikiem" wykonanym telefonem komórkowym. Zdaniem wielu krytyków, ta „sztuka na wyciągnięcie ręki" (Jerry Saltz) rozwija się i przeobraża, zmieniając naszą samoświadomość, mowę ciała,

społeczne relacje i sfery prywatności. W artykule autorka referuje stanowiska badaczy na temat nowych technologii wytwarzania tożsamości, zarysowując główne obszary tych badań, które odnoszą się do performatywnego wymiaru tworzenia wizerunku fotograficznego, praktykowania „tożsamościowego turyzmu", a w szczególności definiowania autobiografii jako obrazu subiektywności należącego do społeczności wirtualnej.

Przełożyła na język polski Teresa Bruś

PROSIMY O CYTOWANIE TEGO ARTYKUŁU JAKO:

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