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Selfie and Digital Self-Presentation: A Multidimensional Approach

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the selfie as a symbolic practice that articulates multiple dimensions of historical, semiotic, sociological, and artistic specificity. Distinct from traditional self-portraits—whether painted or photographic—the selfie is configured as a communicative act that both reflects and transforms the processes of identity construction in the digital age.

Historically, it evolved from a form of pictorial, photographic, or digital self-representation as an experimental image with webcams to a mode of digital self-presentation on social networks. Semiotically, its specificity reveals a dual dimension: it is an enunciated image - a self-portrait conceived as a communicative act - which simultaneously makes visible the very conditions of its enunciation, evident in the extended-arm gesture of its production.

Sociologically, it functions as a ritual of digital self-presentation mediated by filters and editing modalities, where notions of "authenticity" are negotiated under the influence of platform algorithms like those of Instagram.

Artistically, it is inscribed in practices of sociocultural reflection and critique of contemporaneity, as demonstrated in the works of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Amalia Ulman.

In this article, we argue that selfies function as a paradoxical device. They are digital images representing self-presentation practices that coexist with both technological and sociocultural constraints. Consequently, the selfie emerges not merely as an individual performance, but also as a reflection of tensions between production technologies and online norms of representation and publication. This reveals how digital culture has transformed self-representation into an act that is simultaneously intimate and public, free and regulated.

***Keywords**: selfie, digital self-presentation, contemporary self-Portrait, social media and identity, digital performativity.*

In contemporary times, the practice of the selfie has emerged as a central phenomenon of digital culture, surpassing its initial purpose as a self-portrait to become a complex act of self-presentation mediated by technologies and social networks. Rooted in a historical tradition that dates back to the painted self-portraits of Parmigianino and Maurits Cornelis Escher, the selfie distinguishes itself through its immediate and technological performativity, marked by the gesture of the extended arm, the digital camera, and instant publication on digital platforms.

From a methodological perspective, this is a reflective dissertation that draws upon and systematizes several references pertinent to this theme, organized around four analytical foci: historical, semiotic, sociological, and artistic.

Historically, the article situates the selfie as an heir to the traditional self-portrait and a product of technological innovations—from the webcams of the 1990s to today's smartphones, equipped with front-facing cameras and editing applications. The thesis proposed is that this evolution has not only facilitated the production of selfies but has also redefined their symbolic function, contributing to their transformation into more or less ritualized practices of communication and self-presentation.

From a semiotic point of view, the pragmatic singularity of selfies is conceptualized through a dual perspective: that of a personalized, vernacular, and digitally enunciated image (the digital self-portrait) and that of the image-as-enunciation (the visible act of photographing oneself, evident in the extended arm or the decentered framing).

From a sociological angle, the selfie is described within the framework of the symbolic

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management of identities, with reference to the social and aesthetic norms prevalent on digital networks and platforms. This management underlies the various stages of its production, from the choice of settings to the use of editing filters, as part of a kind of "self-presentation ritual" guided by ideals of authenticity and natural beauty, which are often paradoxical.

The artistic dimension of the selfie is explored by revisiting works such as those by Amalia Ulman, Aleta Valente, and Cindy Sherman, which subvert the conventions of its production. These artistic interventions reveal the potential of the selfie as a tool for political and social questioning, whether in feminist activism or in denouncing the commodification of bodies.

I. Historical Framework

The establishment of selfies as a daily digital practice is attested by their recognition as the "Word of the Year" in 2013 by the Oxford English Dictionary. However, its linguistic origin dates back to September 13, 2002, on an Australian online forum (ABC Online's photography forum) when Nathan Hope (as Hopey) posted a self-portrait of his facial injuries resulting from a fall, apologizing for the blurry quality of the image as it was a 'selfie'[1]. This detail is significant as it highlights the structural characteristics of this type of image: its vernacular and everyday content, its production by the photographers themselves using a digital device (likely a compact point-and-shoot digital camera or a webcam at the time) through trial-and-error practice (resulting in a precarious record), and its publication on an online platform[2].

From a historical perspective, the kinship of the selfie with the painted self-portrait is undeniable. Examples include Parmigianino's self-portrait in a convex mirror (1524)[3], those by Van Gogh (1889)[4] and Rembrandt (1669)[5], or Escher's with his hand reflected in a sphere (1935)[6]. This theme of self-portraiture is also recognized in analog photography: spontaneous ones, taken to finish rolls of film; conceptual ones, staged using mirrors or other reflective materials; and more calculated ones, executed with timers[7]. However, contemporary selfies - as digital images - have added distinct particularities to this type of image. As Paul Frosh notes (2015, p. 1607), the aesthetics of the selfie is related to an ostensive performativity of self-presentation, which was not as evident in analog photographic and pictorial self-portraits, and is embodied in the gesture of extending the arm that holds the digital camera or smartphone (sometimes aided by a selfie stick). Thus, the contemporary selfie is not merely a digital self-photograph but also a visible representation of its own production. Jerry Saltz complements this idea by stating that the extended-arm gesture produces a very distinctive configuration of the selfie: resulting from a composition with a decentered angle and framing, with a distortion typical of wide-angle lenses, which exaggerates the depth of the nose, chin, and the arm holding the camera[8] (Saltz, 2014). An additional modality is its vernacular specificity. It is a form of ostensibly spontaneous self-expression, democratized by digital cameras and smartphones. Its symbolic value is derived precisely from its social media publication and circulation, establishing a participatory dynamic that stands in stark contrast to the vertical, unidirectional dissemination of advertising, propaganda, or mass media images.

The Historical Periods of the Digital Selfie

Drawing on the reflections of artist John Monteith, Jerry Saltz has identified two phases in the brief history of the digital selfie, determined by moments of evolution in the internet ecosystem and digital cameras (Saltz, 2024).

Developing a kind of archaeology, Saltz asserts that the first historical phase dates back to self-images captured by webcams fixed on desktop tripods, ensuring low-resolution, chromatically distorted records of everyday motion – a kind of documentary self-video. In photographic (and videographic) terms, the

[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-24992393

[2] https://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2014/08/12/4065062.htm

[3] https://www.omelomirrors.com/blog/parmigianino-and-the-selfie-in-a-convex-mirror/

[4] https://www.artchive.com/artwork/self-portrait-with-bandaged-ear-1889-by-vincent-van-gogh/

[5] https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rembrandt-self-portrait-at-the-age-of-63

[6] https://lumeear.blogspot.com/2023/03/escher-autorretrato-em-esfera-espelhada.html

[7] https://www.picturecorrect.com/selfie-photo-tips-techniques/

[8] For example, a representation as evidenced in the following URL: https://www.grantspasstribune.com/selfies-and-mental-health-the-hidden-impact-on-self-esteem-and-well-being/

performative dimension of self-presentation (extended arm, body posing for the lens) was not yet as evident, being compensated for by a 'testimonial' vocation of simple recording of private and intimate daily life, and by the emerging connection to the internet. They were essentially *life streaming images*: continuous or interpolated records, visual diaries that fed personal websites, representing private spaces, furtive and sexual poses, and personal routines. In this phase, an expressive particularity of the contemporary selfie was already visible: the vernacular, self-produced, and artisanal character of the images, through a desacralization of privacy and intimacy. This characteristic is evident in erotic selfies of body parts or sexual preliminaries, and also in celebrity selfies within their private spheres or daily lives (for example, those of Kim Kardashian West [West, 2015]). Regarding this historical phase, consult references to artists such as Steve Mann (*Wearable Cam*, 1980) and Jennifer Ringley (*Jennicam*, 1996-2004)[9].

The second, contemporary historical phase is already subsidiary to social networks and innovations in the hardware of GoPro cameras and smartphones, alongside advances in image editing software. This position is complemented by that of André Gunthert (2025), who places the establishment of the selfie within the realm of smartphones. In this historical phase, the performative foundation of the self-image persists but acquires other configurative particularities. These include selfies with the camera turned towards the photographer-subject or with a front-facing lens smartphones (both featuring calculated and tight framing, primarily on the face), often combined with the use of a selfie stick, and with wide-angle GoPro cameras (which allow for broader, yet distorted, framing).

We highlight how contemporary selfies are no longer a simple self-record but an original form of visual communication because they combine the narcissism of the primordial experiences of *Jennicam* with the connection to the social networks that emerged in the meantime. This combination forms the ontological foundation of the contemporary selfie. In this phase, the selfie transforms not only into an image of self-presentation – with all the peculiarities of vernacular daily recording – but simultaneously into a record subsidiary to a digital technological device that contributes to the circulation of these images, complemented by the cognitive and retributive sanction of audiences. They are forms of digital image interdependent on platforms such as Flickr, Facebook, Instagram, and, more recently, TikTok, Snapchat, and BeReal. In 2022 alone, the latter platform registered 20 million downloads. Its philosophy of 'forced authenticity' imposes on users the daily production and publication of photographs within a limited two-minute period after notification, thereby limiting opportunities for editing (Wiltgen, 2022).

In terms of represented topics, these contemporary images feature pictures of feet or body parts, intensifying the vernacular recording of daily life and the private and intimate spheres already present in the preceding historical phase. There are selfies that challenge conventions regarding sexuality, nudity, and the boundaries of privacy, such as those of a sexual nature (sexting), revenge pornography or *after sex* selfies [10] (Trivundža, 2015, p. 98). While some view them as a form of youth culture, others consider them the mark of a conjuncture of alienation, evident in a narcissistic process of digital exhibition and commodification (Braga, 2021, p. 648). Several criticisms are leveled against contemporary selfies. They are accused of devolving from personal digital diaries into 'trophy records' of feats, often taken in inappropriate contexts (e.g., funerals or war zones) or during unnecessarily risky activities. Beyond mere provocation, some are deemed unethical, such as documenting disasters or people in distress instead of offering aid (Trivundža, 2015, p. 105). However, Ilija Tomanić Trivundža's (2015) study on the media framing of selfies also highlights positive evaluations. Certain types are recognized as personal records of civic and political engagement. Examples include celebrity endorsements of the ice bucket challenge[11], the *no makeup* selfie movement [12], or the Turkish

[9] https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-37692493

[10] https://revistamarieclaire.globo.com/Comportamento/noticia/2014/04/aftersex-selfie-compartilhar-foto-apos-sexo-e-nova-mania-entre-casais.html

[11] https://caras.com.br/especial/tv/post/ivete-sangalo-angelica-e-outros-famosos-tomam-banho-de-agua-fria-em-campanha.phtml

[12] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2588962/Brains-nomakeupselfie-raised-2m-charity-teen-mother-set-Facebook-page-bedroom-Stoke-Trent.html

Kahkaha campaign, where women posted selfies of themselves laughing to protest a deputy prime minister's statement that deemed such public behavior inappropriate [13] (p. 106). Furthermore, while in Western contexts the selfie is often linked to individualism and narcissism, in more collectivist cultures—such as Japan—it also functions to strengthen community bonds (through group or family selfies) or serves as a tool for sociopolitical activism, as evidenced by its role in the #MeToo movements in India [14].

II. Semiotics: Intersubjective Self-Reflexivity

Contemporary selfies are digital images whose ontological foundation merits analysis from a semiotic perspective, as they transcend mere subjective visual records. For this section, we draw on the frameworks of Paul Frosh (2015) and André Gunthert (2015), which allow us to conceptualize the selfie as a form of visual discourse possessing a specific - and often contradictory - veridictory dimension, situated within a broader process of visual communication.

As a form of visual discourse, selfies are intrinsically linked to a contextual dimension. These images do not merely reflect the context of their self-production but also actively mediate a relationship with their viewers—the digital audience—akin to a kind of visual dialogue or conversation. Consequently, they constitute a hyper-contextual record, inseparable from the contexts of their reception, appropriation, and circulation. This hyper-contextuality requires analyzing selfies through the discursive point of view of 'online publications', where meaning is co-constructed through accompanying captions and the reactions they aim to elicit. André Gunthert (2015, p. 6) illustrates this idea with the seminal 2005 selfie of Flickr's co-founders entitled *Hi Mom* and the caption "This was sent for my parents as I was talking to them on the phone so they could see the view from where we were standing." (Gunthert, 2015, p. 6). This kind of image epitomizes a conversational use of the platform: a real-time notification inscribed within an intersubjective process involving the enunciator, the scene, and the enunciatee. Originating from this conversational pragmatics, the now-ubiquitous gesture of pointing the camera and pressing the shutter has been transformed. It has become the connotator of an ideology of digital communion, inscribing the selfie within the performance of a phatic function (Jakobson, 1995, pp. 125 ff.), primarily oriented toward establishing and maintaining social connection.

Considering, following Roman Jakobson and Bronisław Malinowski, that this function is related to managing contact with the receiver, it is noteworthy how Paul Frosh discerned a provisional repertoire of gestural modalities related to the performative act of extending the arm to produce the selfie. These are ceremonial and protocol forms, inscribed not only in a kind of disciplinary regime of bodily conditioning but essentially in an interpellation of the (digital) audience. Based on photographs by Murad Osmann and the short film by Alex Chacon *Around the World in 360º: 3 Year Epic Selfie*, which use the extended arm and selfie stick as a prosthetic camera support, the author discerned a "lexicon" of pragmatic relationships between Chacon's body and the spectator (and thus the digital audience): "tug of war," "hand on shoulder," "being introduced." These are gestures that lead the spectator to infer and adopt a position in relation to the photographer – self-presentation images that propose a particular type of interaction (Frosh, 2015, pp. 1615-1619). Consequently, the deictic dimension of the contemporary selfie, its strong relationship with enunciatees (digital audiences), and the interdependence on the technological context bring these records closer to an intersubjective and conversational pragmatics through images: "look at me in/with this, here and now." And as important as the representational dimension is the way they aim to elicit performative reactions from digital audiences. It is as if the gesturality of the selfie's production reverberates in an equally gestural response of the digital audiences: swiping images with a finger on the mobile device screen, operating the scroll button, writing comments, selecting sanctioning ideograms ('likes'), and deciding to share or save the image. This dynamic of reception/reaction demonstrates how selfies are no longer inscribed exclusively within a representational

[13] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/30/turkish-women-defy-deputy-pm-laughter

[14] https://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2018/Oct/17/metoo-movement-doesnt-represent-dba-women-yet-raya-sarkar-1886574.html

iconographic paradigm of memory recording or aesthetic refinement, but rather within a communicational and contextual one. They are self-produced digital images orchestrated as part of a relational protocol between a 'Self-photographer' and an invoked 'You-digital spectator'. They presuppose a pragmatic context based not on the simple information transmission-feedback, but on a digitally mediated ritual of symbolic interaction, consisting of a self-presentation image of the sender and its subsequent symbolic sanction by the digital audiences (Goffman, 1959; Setyastuti & Sunuantari, 2021).

Selfies constitute a form of visual discourse fundamentally defined by self-reflexivity: the photographer and the photographed subject are one and the same. This core characteristic manifests along a spectrum. At one pole, selfies align with the tradition of the self-portrait proper, where the focus rests on the *represented subject* (the *énoncé*), as in the work of Cindy Sherman[15]. At the opposite pole, they foreground the enunciative act itself, where *the performance of production* becomes the central subject, exemplified by Amalia Ulman's work [16] . This distinction between representing a subject and performing its portrayal has significant implications for a pragmatics and a sociology of the image. The contemporary selfie operates precisely at this intersection: it presents a represented subject that is simultaneously apprehended as the subject of enunciation. The illocutionary force of the act of self-photographing is embedded within the locutionary content of the image. This is materially evidenced by the visible traces of its production—the extended arm, the selfie stick, the collaborative group pose. Here, the photographer participates in the frame, making the process of enunciation itself a component of the representation. Consequently, while the depicted figure belongs to the domain of the *dictum*—the "what is said" (Rodrigues, 1996, pp. 58-61)—the visible apparatus of capture (e.g., the extended arm) functions as an ostensive index. It signals the conditions of the image's production, placing the selfie within the domain of the *modus* or the performative modality of a subject who self-presents, explicitly or implicitly addressing a digital spectator (the enunciatee). This entire process is mediated by digital platforms. This dichotomy of digital subjectivity-intersubjectivity enables reflection on the sociopolitical implications of the self-image's status. Prior to the contemporary selfie, both in self-portraits and self-photographs, the visual field was associated with a limited space of image circulation and consumption (such as the family sphere of tourist photography or the intimate sphere of erotic self-photography). However, with the contemporary selfie, we witness a reversal of this tendency due to its interdependence with the digital space as a sphere of publication, replication, and image circulation, contributing to a desacralization of intimate and family circles, as well as an opening to spheres of power, as evident in celebrity or political leader selfies.

The contemporary selfie is situated within a paradox of authenticity. Its visual record functions as an index of artisanal and personal expressivity, framing the practice as a symbolic cultural form rooted in the ideological values of spontaneity, naturalness, and authenticity. Crucially, this veridictory dimension is managed through a fundamental contradiction, producing distinct semantic and pragmatic effects. The first pole of this contradiction derives authenticity from a rhetoric of imperfection. Here, authenticity is an effect produced by foregrounding the artifice and contingency of the image's own making. The calculated yet uncertain framing, the amateurish handling of the camera, the disregard for traditional compositional rules, and the performative address to a digital audience collectively generate an aesthetic coded as 'authentic,' 'natural,' and 'instantaneous.' The opposing pole, however, constructs authenticity through a logic of engineered perfection. This involves a meticulous 'image construction engineering' via editing software, designed to conceal or normalize features that deviate from the digital platform-specific aesthetic canons. This manufactured authenticity is equally proclaimed as 'natural' and 'real,' yet it systematically aligns representations with hegemonic norms of race, physique, age, and gender—a process most acutely scrutinized in the self-portrayal of female subjects. This dual mechanism is evidenced both in empirical

[15] https://artmejo.com/let-me-take-a-selfie-cindy-sherman-and-the-shift-to-instagram/

[16] https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/amalia-ulman-instagram-excellences-perfections/index.html

research on influencer practices (Setyastuti & Sunuantari, 2021, p. 35) and in the critical artistic performances of Amalia Ulman and Cindy Sherman, which explicitly deconstruct these very norms.

III. Sociology: The Presentation and Reward Dynamics

A parallel can be drawn between contemporary selfies in the online environment and everyday life interactions, though with the key distinction that the intersubjective face-to-face context is here mediated by technology—namely, the internet and social networks. Furthermore, the nature of this performance is idealized (Goffman, 1993, p. 49; Littlejohn, 1988, pp. 218–221), meaning it is staged by the subjects to present their best version, with contours that conform to the values and requirements determining the self-presentation context.

The Representation of Self in Digital Life

There is a dynamic of conformity in the production of selfies that facilitates a relatively stereotyped, ceremonial, and ritual configurative outcome. This particularity stems from the fact that the subjects who produce them possess a refined awareness of their own subjectivity and of what they perceive to be others' expectations regarding themselves and their behaviors. Selfies thus reflect a pronounced self-consciousness, particularly concerning the representation of body and pose, as well as other complementary parameters—such as the selection of setting, props, and even photographic editing options—with consequences for both the type of image production itself and its final configuration/composition. They are, therefore, the result of mobilizing more or less manageable symbolic competencies, inscribed in what Erving Goffman termed the "personal front" (Goffman, 1993, pp. 34–43). Considered from this analytical angle, selfies constitute a form of sociability in which an individual presents themselves to digital audiences who assume the actantial role of sanctioners. The existence of this sanctioning dimension, inherent to the publication of selfies on social networks, materializes in increasingly standardized forms of image production. This situation is only possible if, as concluded by Mayda P. Setyastuti and Manik Sunuantari (2021, p. 35), digital audiences function as a kind of panoptic entity (Foucault, 1975) that is, if their conduct derives from performing a role of social control and surveillance, ensuring the conformity of published selfies with the axiological structure underlying the very processes of digital self-presentation.

Regarding how selfies reflect a social performance of self-presentation in reference to an axiological framework, we draw on the study by Mayda P. Setyastuti and Manik Sunuantari, which examines the values most emphasized by female interviewees in their image production. The results are transversal. The most appreciated principle was that of 'truth/authenticity', which imposes a natural – not artificial – expressivity in the selfie production (Setyastuti & Sunuantari, 2021, p. 32). The young women surveyed considered that selfies are more valued the more they conform to a regime of veridictory coherence from which digital self-presentation (appearance) should always be consistent with a personal essence (being). The selfie's credibility requires not only a sincere dramaturgical performance in the way one poses and is represented but also a credible production, from the perspective that there is nothing to hide, everything is transparent, without secret. In the name of a digital self-presentation intended to be 'true', everything conspires so that, if manipulations exist, they are never recognizable as such, as if the way the selfie was produced had to be congruent with the essence of the self-presenting subject himself (Setyastuti & Sunuantari, 2021, p. 34).

Also from the research by Mayda P. Setyastuti and Manik Sunuantari, it was possible to consider selfies inscribed in a symbolic process of digital self-presentation based on three phases: pre-production, production, and post-production (Setyastuti & Sunuantari, 2021, pp. 28–34). This model captures the entire workflow of crafting the digital image, from its initial conception to its publication on the social network.

In the pre-production phase, certain settings are preferably chosen. With the inevitable risk of reductionism, these are non-polluted or minimally transformed places, such as gardens and deserted beaches, rural landscapes. They are clear, natural, wild, or raw, not dominated. They can also be urban, provided they are touristically picturesque. Other locations of a more historical character or where events emerge (e.g., war or accidents) are also mobilized, but these are already related to the production of additional meaning effects concerning the emergence of

testimony ("look at me, I was here"). The selection of settings should not be incongruent with a self-presentation intended to be spontaneous and sincere. They should not be artificial, in the sense of imposing themselves in the image composition. The same applies to lighting: either natural (requiring the management of key times of day) or, in the case of artificial lighting (such as LED), the most diffuse to avoid casting shadows that might affect the spontaneity of the pose or interfere with the location where the subject presents themselves. These are particularities considered and managed in preparing the selfie. The same precautions are noted in the choice of attire and makeup, also consonant with that veridictory dimension of 'truth/authenticity'. The chosen clothing cannot be ostentatious, paired with props that are congruent in terms of size, shape, and color, and makeup as disguised as possible, from the perspective of 'naturalness'. Wrinkled clothing, artificial props, and garish makeup are avoided. In selfies, the aesthetics of the smooth and the disguised are omnipresent as an expressive regime.

In the selfie production phase, Setyastuti and Sunuantari, besides highlighting the importance attributed by interviewees to pose spontaneity, also evidenced the importance of image capture equipment, primarily the most advanced smartphone models capable of producing high-resolution images under various lighting conditions and of hosting image editing applications. The high resolution of smartphones combined with such software should not be understood as a technical standard but as a fundamental expressive resource: just like makeup in the pre-production phase, it was pointed out by interviewees as relevant for the quality of an image intended to be 'natural', meaning unaffected in terms of definition and colorimetry (color temperatures, hues, saturation). Regarding image composition, it should be as non-artificial as possible: without extreme high or low angles, overly wide or tight shots. Everything boils down to the same objective: ensuring an expressivity aligned with that principle of 'truth/authenticity' which, in the realm of beauty, materializes in a presence, a purpose, a personal power or, using Goffman's terminology, a 'manner' (Goffman, 1993, p. 43) inherent to an elegant and natural appearance (Setyastuti & Sunuantari, 2021, p. 35).

The post-production phase is also adjacent to the management of software, image editing procedures, and correlates with the scheduling of selfie publication on social networks. It also reflects the ideological criteria concerning the principle of beauty that should be 'true,' requiring the use of software available on smartphones. In terms of equipment, the interviewees referenced by the authors mentioned mainly two models: Samsung Galaxy S9 and iPhone X. They already anticipate the current trend of technological integration in mobile phones regarding image capture under various conditions, storage capacity for diverse image file formats (including RAW files), and an architecture capable of hosting image editing applications. The interviewees primarily used two applications for post-production: Adobe Lightroom and Google Snapseed. These tools were employed to adjust core parameters such as tone, contrast, and brightness. Furthermore, Snapseed was specifically highlighted for its use in retouching—reducing skin blemishes and refining details to achieve a flawless appearance.

Complementing the data from this study, it is also crucial to consider the impact of newer selfie manipulation technologies powered by Augmented Reality (AR), which raise a new set of critical questions. To what extent do these tools intensify algorithmic beauty standards—standards that are inherently encoded within the platforms themselves? Furthermore, when users edit their faces in real time (enlarging eyes, lightening and smoothing skin), do they merely adapt to these norms, or do they actively participate in naturalizing increasingly idealized and homogeneous benchmarks? These questions reconceptualize the contemporary selfie: it is no longer solely a practice of self-identity construction but also a process of digitally conforming faces and bodies to metric ideals. Consequently, future research should examine not only the technical modalities of this production but also the broader social institutions and platform architectures that govern and incentivize these conformities.

Uses and Gratifications: A Utilitarian Conception

In *Me, Myselfie and I,* J. Veldhuis and her team (Veldhuis et al., 2020, pp. 3–13) also postulated that the motivations underlying selfie production can also be explained through the uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rosengren et al., 1985). This perspective aligns with and extends the work of Setyastuti and

Sunuantari (2021), who link digital self-presentation to a quest for social status and influence.

Veldhuis et al.'s specific contribution lies in grounding these motivations in the psychological states of body image. Their empirical research with adolescents reveals a critical dichotomy in how body (dis)satisfaction shapes selfie practices:

a) Adolescents with negative body image and high self-consciousness tend to produce selfies engaging in self-objectification. Their images conform to stereotypical ideals of appearance and sexuality, transforming the body into an aesthetic object. Positive audience feedback (likes, comments) on these images serves as a retributive sanction that can paradoxically reinforce self-esteem through this conformity;

b) Conversely, adolescents with higher self-esteem and a positive body image post selfies more frequently and deliberately. Their motivation, however, is not conformity but the assertion of physical uniqueness. They post with the expectation that audience reactions will validate and reinforce their distinctive traits.

This analysis underscores the profoundly strategic and calculative nature of contemporary selfie production. The act is inextricably linked to the anticipated social feedback loop of online publication. Within this economy, 'likes' function as a form of socially mediated symbolic capital, a currency that validates identity performances and satisfies core psychological needs.

IV. Art: Inquiries and Reflections

Drawing on references such as those of Erving Goffman and Setyastuti and Sunuantari, it has been demonstrated how contemporary selfies are iconographic records whose configuration and expressive dynamics reflect an axiological framework managed and instituted by digital audiences and social networks. It is precisely to highlight the role played by this axiological framework that the work of three artists referenced by Paula Braga (2021, pp. 585-596) is described: Amalia Ulman, Aleta Valente, and Cindy Sherman. It should be added that the production of these artists goes beyond the strict theme of selfies as forms of digital self-presentation toward a broader questioning of other alternative social meanings, as will be emphasized later.

In 2018, Amalia Ulman, regarding the series *Excellences and Imperfections*, realized a set of selfies published on social networks. Paula Braga states that the artist's work was characterized by images congruent with the aforementioned axiology of 'truth/authenticity', which is materialized in images of episodes from her daily life, with erotic poses in sophisticated settings[17] (Braga, 2021, p. 670). Several months, and 90,000 followers later, the artist revealed that it had all been a performance; that her hot babe status was simply a persona; that she had performed a fictional identity based on the most popular photos published on Instagram, mainly of (rich, white, and young) girls. We consider this artist's work relevant for demonstrating, from a veridictory point of view, a record of what, apparently, is congruent with the values and expectations of digital audiences and social networks, but which, in reality, constitutes a shrewd form of denaturalization and critique of the previously described processes of personal gratification.

Her pose, the settings she chose, the props... – which belong to the domain of a digital appearance – were purportedly consonant with Instagram's requirements, based on that ideal of young, natural, and sophisticated beauty. By demystifying the hoax, what the artist demonstrated was the strategic, fabricated, and arbitrary nature of this appearance – that 'natural spontaneity' is nothing more than the product of a process of symbolic normalization stemming from microstructures of power, both technological (algorithmic) and social. Hence her images were convincing – not strange, nor estranged. The publication of a clarification message about the fake nature of her images (thus, a notification about an appearance that in reality is not) revealed the (dis)simulated character of her performance. The audience's reaction was quite negative, with hateful

[17] https://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/oct/20/first-look-amalia-ulmanexcellences-perfections/

comments (but also with 'likes') (Braga, 2021, p. 671).

Like Amalia Ulman, Aleta Valente's practice subverts the dominant veridiction criteria of the digital selfie. However, Valente's strategy is one of frontal confrontation rather than covert imitation. She creates selfies that are explicitly incompatible with - and subversive of - the prevailing regimes of feminine beauty and identity on social networks. As Paula Braga (2021) notes, Valente adopts a register of deliberate transgression and embraced inappropriateness, asserting that femininity can encompass a bearded face or a provocatively posed body in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro[18] as readily as a flawless visage (p. 670). Thus, while Ulman deconstructed a *pseudo-beautiful*, Valente constructs a veridictory non-beautiful. Her selfies are a manifesto of declared non-conformity, an expressive and grotesque rupture aimed at deconstructing the feminine ideal to rediscover identity beyond it[19]. This aesthetic is fundamentally one of excess and disillusionment. It manifests as an excess of intimacy (e.g., selfies with menstrual blood stains) and of exposure (violating platform norms through volume and explicit content). Ultimately, it conveys a profound disenchantment, rejecting neoliberalism's promises of happiness, prosperity, and emancipation (Braga, 2021, p. 700). The relevance of this artist's work lies in its critical dialogue with other contemporary, often spontaneous, alternative selfie practices. These practices engage with urgent themes such as bodily autonomy and gender identity (e.g., the #MyBodyMyChoice and #TransIsBeautiful movements) or form part of broader civic struggles for women's rights, as seen in the 2022 protests by Iranian women against the mandatory hijab[20]. Collectively, these phenomena demonstrate that the contemporary selfie has evolved beyond a tool for self-presentation and identity management. In specific socio-political contexts, it now also functions as a form of civic and political activism, protest, and social mobilization.

Paula Braga also points to Cindy Sherman as an artist who uses the self-portrait to interrogate contemporaneity. In this context, the art works of Ulman, Valente, and Sherman function as complementary critiques. Each artist dismantles the expressively consecrated ideals of feminine digital subjectivity found in this kind of image.

Like Aleta Valente, Cindy Sherman uses grotesque stagings of femininity in her work, as seen in her bearded self-portrait[21]. Crucially, her work subverts the very conventions that underpin the normative 'authentic' selfie. Where standard practice (as noted by Setyastuti and Sunuantari) relies on diffuse lighting and meticulous post-production to perfect texture - erasing blemishes and smoothing skin for an even, 'natural' finish - Sherman's digital self-portraits do the opposite. Using tools like FaceTime, she manipulates texture and form to create deliberately implausible, distorted images, often paired with narrations of personal experience. This grotesque register, akin to Valente's selfies, serves to confront and dismantle stereotypical mandates of feminine beauty.

The choice to focus on these three artists, following Paula Braga's analysis, is deliberate. Their work provides a critical lens for deconstructing the instituting dynamics of the selfie as a symbolic form of digital self-presentation. Beyond critique, their practices highlight the potential of the digital self-portrait as a tool for civic activism and resistance. By proposing alternative narratives about identity, gender, and the body in the public digital sphere, they not only problematize dominant codes of online self-representation but also open new aesthetic avenues for civic and political intervention.

Conclusion

This essay has proposed a multifaceted analysis of the selfie as a technological, social, and artistic phenomenon. Starting from a reflective and descriptive approach, a conceptual and historical delimitation was undertaken, some of its expressive and sociological particularities were characterized, and the way these are reflected from a subversive/alternative perspective through the practices of three artists: Amalia Ulman, Aleta Valente, and Cindy Sherman. These dimensions of analysis are now articulated,

[18] https://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/artes-visuais/do-instagram-galeria-aleta-valente-debate-em-selfies-temas-como-feminismo-aborto-ocupacao-da-cidade-24081195

[19] https://www.pipaprize.com/2019/03/pipa-prize-2019-nominees-2nd-bulletin/aleta-valente-not-pregnant-series/

[20] https://www.dw.com/en/why-iran-cannot-turn-back-time-on-public-hijab-rule/a-72616469

[21] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/05/magazine/instagram-cindy-sherman-ugly-beauty.html

highlighting contributions achieved and proposing directions for future research.

It has been demonstrated how the selfie, although rooted in the tradition of painted and photographic self-portraiture (e.g., Parmigianino, Van Gogh), distinguishes itself through its digital performativity. Technological evolution – from the webcams of the 1990s to contemporary smartphones – has transformed it into an intentional communicative gesture, marked by the extended arm (or the use of a selfie stick) and instant publication on social networks. This change reflects the transition from a vernacular aesthetics of testimony and memory (e.g., evident in the visual diaries of *Jennicam*) to one of digital self-staging, where the image is shaped by algorithms and the expectations of digital audiences. In this part of the article, it was demonstrated how selfies, although inscribed in an artistic lineage, establish a relationship of rupture with the traditional self-portrait due to digital interactivity.

Drawing on the adaptation of Erving Goffman's theses (1959) on the forms of presentation and management of social actors' identities, the selfie was also conceived as a form of identity performance, within which strategies of self-presentation mediated by social networks and for digital audiences are developed. Based on Setyastuti and Sunuantari (2021), authors of a study on self-presentation strategies employed by users aspiring to be digital influencers, it was considered that such performance encompasses three phases: pre-production (concerning the selection of settings and the management of 'appearances'); production (inherent to the use of smartphones and the composition of selfie images); and post-production (within which image editing is managed in conformity with an ideology promoted by social networks, primarily Instagram, concerning a beauty intended to be 'true' and 'authentic'). It was emphasized how this process, apparently individual, is, in fact, coercive, subject to the panoptic surveillance of social networks (Foucault, 1975), where 'likes' and comments act as cognitive and retributive sanctions that reinforce conformities. In this part of the essay, an attempt was also made to demonstrate how current selfie practice stems from an inseparable relationship between technology (inherent to smartphone evolutions, the existence of social networks, the emergence of algorithms) and the (social) norms that determine regular and expected forms of selfie production and presentation. Recall the example of the *BeReal* platform which, in the name of authenticity and spontaneity, encourages users to produce their selfies daily, with the phone's front and rear cameras, requiring them to be produced and published within a limited two-minute period.

Complementing these ideas and with reference to Paula Braga's essay (2021), the work of some artists who reflected in their work this performative duality of selfies (technological and social) was described, but from an "alternative" angle that clarifies how selfies are at the confluence of individual freedom with social control, of subjective expression and originality with conformity and stereotype. The works of Amalia Ulman, Aleta Valente, and Cindy Sherman enabled the dismantling of the illusion of selfie authenticity. Amalia Ulman exposed the fabrication of an 'Instagrammable' persona to critique the fetishization of white, young, and sexualized beauty. In turn, Aleta Valente, through the grotesque register (consider the selfies with a beard), questioned the standards of femininity consecrated in those digital self-presentation strategies. Cindy Sherman explored digital distortions to denaturalize the apparently 'perfect' texture of the skin, one of the expressive canons of the ideology of 'natural' and 'authentic' beauty.

The productions of these artists highlighted how the contemporary selfie can be inscribed in a type of performativity that reacts to the commodification of bodies on digital platforms. This particularity is important: if, on the one hand, it is a type of image that can reproduce power structures (technological, aesthetic, social), on the other, it can also offer tools to contest them – whether through art or activism. This idea underlies possible avenues of research merely glimpsed in this work, for example, those concerning the status of selfies in digital activism (protest selfies) and how they are sometimes appropriated within advertising strategies; those referring to the potential tension between algorithms and the diversity of judgment criteria of digital users (which marginalize non-normative bodies – obese, Black, transgender); or domains of study related to post-humanism, regarding the impact of new technologies of avatars and deepfakes on the very notion of the selfie as a type of digital self-portrait.

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