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INTRODUCTION: THE SEMIOTICS OF SELFIES

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Since the beginning of the new millennium, the near universal spread of camera-loaded smartphones and web photo sharing has led to the profuse growth of all the historically familiar genres of vernacular photography, such as family snapshots and photos of friends, travel and vacation photos, landscape and photo-booth photos. The first institution to be challenged by the smartphone camera-wielding multitudes was journalism, where we 've seen the massive invasion of amateur imagery into the prestigious terrain of 'breaking news' and documentary photography. The photojournalists' response was to castigate the amateurs' lack of the objectivity and ethical standards that give their profession its distinctive public value and significance. At least as much, if not more, controversy accompanied the astounding popularity of selfie-taking. If in the case of the omnipresent 'accidental photo-reporter' what was at stake was the moral status and legitimacy of photojournalism, in the case of the ubiquitous 'accidental self-portraitist' the stake was the moral status and legitimacy of the time-cherished institution of the self-portrait. With a pedigree that goes back to the cultural heroes of the Renaissance, the artist's self-portrait is a visual genre that, both in painting and photography, is revered as a signature artwork, crucial for the self-fashioning of the artist as well as for the art-historical significance of his work. The artworld's reaction is characteristically defensive. The exhibition *This is not a Selfie* at the San José Museum of Art (2017), comprising 80 photo self-portraits created by celebrated artists, aimed, according to the Museum's curator Rory Padeken, at highlighting the importance of distinguishing between selfies and 'the fine art genre of photographic self-portraiture' (Artdaily 2017). His statement condenses the artworld's resolve to deny any blurring of the borderlines between experts' and laymen's self-portraits. At the same time, the artworld has readily incorporated to the art-historical narrative various artists' engagement with the bland, unpretentious aesthetics of photo-booth portaiture – like Andy Warhol, Francis Bacon or Cindy Sherman – and, more recently, the selfies made by Ai Weiwei, the self-confessed 'best selfie artist' (Sooke 2017).

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Condemned to the gratuitousness, overindulgence and profanity of the extra-aesthetic the self-portrayal of the anonymous mass of non-artists, made for the sake of intimate sociality rather than of posterity or artisanship, seems suspicious and scandalous, a symptom of some sinister socio-psychological pathology (e.g. narcissism, exhibitionism) or yet another instance of capitalist ideological manipulation. Vilification of new media technologies and practices is sadly more the rule than the exception in communications history. From the 'reading mania' in the 18th century to the current 'selfie epidemic', the path of modernity is strewn with outbreaks of media panic and the pathologization of media users, targeting especially women and youth (see e.g. Travers Scott 2018). Made a few years before the emergence of selfies, Jean-Pierre Jeunet's critically acclaimed romantic comedy film *Les fabuleaux destin d' Amélie Poulain* (2001) proves unwittingly prophetic of the kind of pathologization that was in store for selfie-takers. Nino, a rather idiosyncratic young man, collects the discarded photo-portraits of strangers from photo-booths. Both he and Amélie, the romantically imaginative heroine, are mystified by the expressionless photo-portraits systematically left torn in different photo-booths by the same man. They believe that he is either a ghost or someone obsessed with the idea of death. The riddle of the 'mystery man' is solved when Amélie discovers that he is the photo-booth repairman whose discarded photo-portraits are simply part of his testing procedure. Nino's and Amélie's patent over-interpretation of an ordinary, everyday practice as a sign of metaphysical apparition or ontological angst offers a prescient parody of the socio-medical discourse on selfie-taking. To the relatively younger audience of Millenials, in addition, the film acted as a reminder of the fact that self-photography is not an innovation of the digital age but a long-standing familar and widespread practice, associated with much earlier forms of photographic technology, such as the photo-booth or self-timer camera accessories. The international success of Jeunet's film may have contributed to the rekindling of interest in photo-booths, which in recent years have seen a nostalgic revival. More significantly, the emergence of digital self-portraiture has led to a sweeping new interest in the study of the self-portrait in both its artistic-professional and its vernacular forms.

Being the first modern communication technology to be popularised, photography has, in fact, given rise to the first kind of vernacular media culture. The radical transformation that was unleashed by the mass marketization of the portable, user-friendly Kodak camera in the 1880s, is inscribed in the very definition of what 'popular photography' is really about. As pointed out by Robert Pols, 'when the 19th century is considered, it means "photography for the people"; in the 20th century, it increasingly comes to mean "photography by the people"'(Pols 2002: 20). In our digital times, vernacular media culture goes by the name 'user-generated culture' and encompasses a profuse variety of web-circulated amateur digital artifacts, amongst whom selfies are at once the most popular and the most controversial. The bulk of the selfie-ology produced so far, however, seems to forget the wealth of visual methodologies developed to comprehend the complexities of our modern imagescape and continues the

traditional practice of dealing with the extra-artistic in the summary terms of psychological or sociological reductions rather than as forms of signification imbricated in social discourse and communication.

Between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, the parallel endeavour of Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco to unravel the codes of mass-produced culture have effectively founded postwar semiotics as an analytical-critical project that, going against the grain of the then dominant paradigm of cultural criticism, addressed the wild, hitherto uncharted fields of popular culture rather than the noble, well-tended gardens of elite culture. This path-breaking moment subsequently faded, since, with few notable exceptions, the ensuing academic canonisation of semiotics prompted a preoccupation with either the cultural canon or the avant-garde. In this context, even the Formalists' adroit insights into folk culture were gentrified, relocated as they were onto the rarefied heights of auratic texts. In either case, semiotics has never adequately responded to the challenge of the other, equally reviled and neglected as a topic for serious consideration field of popularly produced culture, in other words, of vernacular media culture. As regards photography perhaps the last works of Barthes offer some fertile starting points.

Both *Camera Lucida*, published shortly before his untimely death, and the last seminar he had prepared for his lecture series at the Collége de France, dealing with Proust and photography (Barthes 2003), were about vernacular photography, and specifically, about amateur made pictures charged with highly intimate significance. In *Camera Lucida,* Barthes expresses his irritation with the sociological reduction of 'the worlds' countless photographs' to familialist ideology – as, most notably, Bourdieu (1966) had done. By defining the essense of photography 'separated from the "pathos" of which it consists', he remarks, none such approach discusses 'precisely the photographs which interest me, which give me pleasure or emotion', those photographs in which 'I see only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body' (Barthes 1981: 7, 21). Reversing the established hierarchy of values, but also opening up a perspective that can possibly deconstruct the art/vernacular photography opposition, he cites in parantheses his most iconoclastic thought:

> (Usually the amateur is defined as an immature state of the artist: someone who cannot – or will not – achieve the mastery of a profession. But in the field of photographic practice, it is the amateur, on the contrary, who is the assumption of the professional: for it is he who stands closer to the noeme of Photography.) (Barthes 1981: 99)

Established artistic and professional photographic genres enjoy a discernible identity over time, since their respective institutional settings guarantee the adherence to certain rules and conventions, as well as an active dialogue with a discrete tradition of works and authors. Vernacular photographic genres, on the other hand, have a much more fluid generic identi-

ty based on tacit understandings and rules grounded in particular social contexts, uses and practices. Vernacular photography, Buse suggests, 'while it is sometimes described as a genre, it might be better understood as a social practice which partakes of many photographic modes' (Buse 2016: 146). In common, moreover, with the other vernacular media cultures that followed – like amateur filmmaking and radio – its emergence and subsequent growth was dependent upon the design and promotion of modern media as user-friendly technologies, accessible to the unskilled and the non-professional. Hence, 'it is highly dependent on and responsive to technological change, since so many (although not all) of its practitioners rely on equipment that requires little skill and the exact workings of which they do not understand' (ibid.). Consequently, the question of the selfies as a vernacular digital culture hinges both on the issue of the singularly affective dynamics of vernacular imagery, as indicated by Barthes, and on the issue of the singularity of the digital media themselves, their affordances as semiotic technologies shaping the contemporary imagescape, as explored by social semiotics (see e.g. Zappavigna 2016; Zhao and Zappavigna 2018a, 2018b).

The special issue on the 'Semiotics of Selfies' starts out with Paulius Jevsejevas' exploration of animal selfies as a distinctive part of the selfie phenomenon characterized by a particular enunciative practice featuring the semiotic construction of the animal face. Employing Eric Landowski's semiotics of interactions, Jevsejevas demonstrates the significance of animal selfies for the anthrozoological problematics, as a site for comprehending the contemporary redefinition of human-animal interactions and of humanity itself.

In the following article, Massimo Leone develops a strategy of denaturalizing the all too familiar selfies by employing Umberto Eco's hermeneutic trichotomy, i.e. the distinction between *intentio auctoris*, *intentio lectoris* and *intentio operis*. Proceeding to chart the different analytical and interpetive tasks and challenges involved in each of these levels of meaning, Leone rounds off his comprehensive account by focusing on the selfies' vital connection with the temporal ideology of the present, of an always renewed 'here and now', unmoored from history and memory.

In the next contribution, Sebastián Moreno focuses on the practice of selfie-taking as a complex negotiation between the offline/perceived self and the online/expressed self. Combining the insights of Jean-Marie Floch and those of social constructivism Moreno proposes a processual model of selfie-taking whose analytical force serves to reveal the thickly coded and essentially contractual character of the selfie as a realistic 'show of the self'.

Finally, Benson Rajan investigates the process through which fitness influencers in social media produce and perform their 'fit' visuals, and its relationship with anorexia nevrosa and other eating disorders. Combining in-depth interviews with Indian female fitness influencers and a semiotic reading of the gestural aspects of their selfies, Rajan highlights the discursive formations, rules and limits that define the technocultural circuit of kinesthetic sociability connecting the production and reception of fitness selfies.

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