Their Faces. Building the Semiotic Case of Animal Selfies

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In this paper, I attempt to provide a tentative semiotic description of animal selfies. I treat animal selfies as part of the broader selfie phenomenon and interpret them with regard to some general considerations of how selfies might be seen as texts of a particular enunciative practice that is intertwined with social media. I argue that selfies are related to the mirror and depend on constructing the face-object; that they are a way of sharing enunciative positions; that they can be conceptualized as personal deixes that intimate the person sharing her experiences. All of these features feed into the peculiar morphologic invention of the animal face in animal selfies, which I take as a reference point for a description of a larger variety of anmal selfies. Through the animal face, animals take part in the enunciative practice of selfies and in the interfacial sphere of sharing personal experiences. To put animal face selfies in a broader context of animal selfies, I make use of the sociosemiotic framework of modes of meaning and interaction developed by Eric Landowski. I take animal face selfies to be representative of one mode, Manipulation, and then discuss animal selfies as dependent upon other modes, Programming, Adjustment and Accident.

Keywords   selfies, animal selfies, human, animal, modes of meaning

Animal selfies as a subject of semiotic inquiry

In 2013, 'selfie' was named Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year. The definition provided by Oxford Dictionaries is as follows: *A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media.* (Oxford Dictionaries 2019). This formula is a definition of the selfie as a technological practice of image production and exchange: it describes the kind of image produced, the typical procedure, the devices used and the social and media environment wherein the images are offered to spectators for inter-

pretation. It is useful for the purposes of a semiotic analysis of selfie images because it recognizes that the use of smartphones and social media is inherent to the selfie phenomenon. The potential implications of these conditions have already been highlighted. According to Alise Tifentale and Lev Manovich, 'the implications of particular technologies [...] are exactly what makes the selfie substantially different from its earlier precursors' (Tifentale, Manovich 2015: 8). I will take heed of this when attempting a semiotic description of selfies. I will describe selfies as a semiotic phenomenon with an emphasis on the coexistence of different levels that constitute their meaning (I see the interrelation of these levels as part of the substantial difference stressed by Tifentale and Manovich). As indicated by the title of this paper, I will consider such selfies in which animals or some sort of animality is depicted, calling all of their variants animal selfies.

The corpus of selfies presented and described in this article is limited by a dominant morphological feature – I will only be considering selfies with visible heads, be they animal or human. This means that leg selfies, hand selfies, abs selfies, butt selfies, eye selfies, beard selfies, armpit selfies or genital selfies will not be considered. Admittedly, this is a significant limitation. But it springs from my initial focus on what I shall call the 'animal face' – a particular meaning effect by which animals acquire faces and which makes the selfie genre interesting in terms of contemporary conceptions of animals and animality.[1] Through this effect, animals are acknowledged as quasi-human subjects, on a par with their human partners. Hence, my limited choice of head and face selfies is conditioned by the problematic of the animal face as a reference point for analysis.

As I have mentioned above, I will consider animal selfies to be all types of selfies where animals or anything related to animality is present in a figuratively recognizable guise. These shall include selfies physically taken by animals themselves (Figure 1, Figure 20); fictional selfies supposedly taken by animals (Figure 2, Figure 16); selfies taken by humans with in the background (Figure 15, Figure 17); selfies taken by humans with animals nearby (Figures 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14); selfies taken by humans for animals and their social profiles, seeking the impression of animal user autonomy (Figure 4, Figure 10, Figure 11), Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11, Figure 12,); selfies taken by humans wearing animal masks (Figure 3, Figure 18, Figure 19); selfies taken by humans using augmented reality software apps (Figures 21, Figure 22, Figure 23).

It is only by treating selfies as texts and enunciative practices that I am able to include many of these types. If I stuck to a definition strictly confined to a technological practice, then even David Slater's famous macaque selfie (Figure 1) shouldbe disregarded since it was not the animal itself who put the selfie on the internet, and even the actual use of photographic technology by the animal could be questioned on cognitive grounds (is the animal taking a photo of itself or is it just grabing some thing it finds interesting?). Similarly, fictional animal selfies (Figure 2) could be disregarded for simply not being real, animal mask selfies (Figure 3) for not being animal enough etc. This is a position someone might possibly take and defend.

However, in the terms espoused here: 1) all of the aforementioned examples are selfies and they circulate as such; 2) all of these selfies or, indeed, animal selfies, provide some view of animals or animality and thus might be considered a site for a human understanding of animals, even though some of them might prove more significant than others.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

As for 1), all of these are selfies, because in terms of meaning images are constituted on different levels. Maria Giulia Dondero distinguishes four such levels: the text (morphology), the genre (enunciative praxis / perceptive and semantic memory), the situation (enunciation and perception as acts) and status (stabilized usage and interpretation) (Basso Fossali, Dondero 2015: 68). All of the levels coexist and do not predetermine one another unilaterally, it is their interrelation that matters. For example, the fact that an animal took a selfie because it was induced or imagined to do so by a human who then shared the selfie does not cancel out the selfie-specific textual arrangement of the image or its status recognition on the internet.

Thus, even if we know that the koala in Figure 2 did not take the selfie nor share it and even though we have encountered the image in the context of advertising rather than a peer-to-peer social interaction, the textual morphology (we clearly see a representation of an act of taking a selfie) and perceptive and semantic memory (the use of a camera together with a mirror, the relatively narrow field of view suggestive of a phone camera, the banality and intimacy of the circumstances) are enough for us to recognize the image as a selfie taken by an animal (albeit a fictional one). It is also used sarcastically as a 'terrible animal picture' in order to remind the spectator of the higher-quality images made by professional nature photographers, which for the purposes of this paper counts as an element of the way the animal takes part in the selfie.

The same goes for Figure 1 where a real animal did take a photo of itself but probably

didn't know or care it was doing just that and never intended to share it. There is an act of enunciation wherein the animal has approached the camera and pushed the button: we can see the hand of the macaque stretching out behind the frame, explicitly demonstrating the spatial and temporal limitations of a self-photograph made with a handheld device. There is also a particular tilt of the head that suggests, by ways of genre-memory, a certain propensity to immediately address, to be seen and reacted to by whomever the photo is sent to.

This also applies to Figure 4, where a real animal was photographed and the photo captioned and shared by people who own and take care of the animal. First, the centrality and forward protrusion of the body and especially the head, as well as the lack of a portrait-like stability of the background and composition, successfully imitate the 'casual feel' of the selfie. Second, the photo has been captioned and made part of an Instagram feed of a personal profile of Esther the Wonder Pig. In the caption, there is talk of early mornings which makes the photo an instance of everyday media accounting (see p. 7). Through the perceptive dominance of the snout, ears and eyes – and a projection of a face – this photo appears as an effusion of the most intimate personal presence in the general everyday flow of photographs in a profile. As I shall try to show later, such effusion of personal presence is one possible description of the selfie in general. A selfie purist might say that all of the above are attempts to imitate real human-made selfies, but even so, they are successful attempts, and as such they are animal selfies. They need to be explained as a particular way to make sense of animals with obvious animal participation.

Then again, there are limits to this interplay of different levels on which the meaning of images is constituted. Another photo of Esther the Wonder Pig (see Figure 5), should not be considered a selfie, as it reveals too much of the body and the background, does not bring us very close to the position of enunciation, has an angle that suggests the cognitive activity of an autonomous observer etc. It is a portrait snapshot that acquires intensely personal undertones because of its caption and its being part of the feed of a particular personal Instagram profile, but this does not make it a selfie.

Figure 4

Figure 5

As for 2), selfies are one of the numerous sites where a human understanding of animals or animality is instituted, developed and maintained. As such, they pose the general

problems of representation, agency, power relations, objectivation, personhood etc. In this article, I shall describe animal selfies using a Greimasian sociosemiotic framework of modes of meaning and interaction, developed by Eric Landowski (Landowski 2005). This framework has the advantage of allowing for an analytic and non-ontologizing description of social and existential meaning implications of texts, without adopting some predefined standard of their limits of interpretation. The framework also facilitates working with a corpus of multiple texts, since the semiotic concept of interaction is not an explanation of textual coherence or interpretability, but a field of general systematic distinctions between different ways in which actantial relations are established. Landowski distinguishes four modes. These different ways of establishing actantial relations function as general models for the meaning of our being in the world. Whenever a (anthropologic) subject encounters someone or something in the world, this very encounter depends on one or another actantial form, an 'existential style' or a mode of interaction, which allows for the production of meaning. Texts and uses of texts also establish actantial relations and thus reveal how worldly encounters are understood by those producing and using the texts. In this particular case, the sociosemiotic framework will allow for a description of animal selfies without losing sight of their immersion in social media and the semiotic underpinnings of their medium and practice of production. It will allow me to see such differences between animal selfies as based on different conceptions of how humans encounter animals or animality as someone or something that needs to be interacted with through some kind of actantial relations.

The animal face in selfies: animals as enunciators

On the grounds of this very general conception of animal selfies as a site for the human understanding of animals and animality, I would like to single out a certain form of animal selfies as a focus and a point of reference for further analysis. I consider this form to be more significant than others both because some of its practitioners have reached a rather high level of execution and because it uses the genre to transform our visual access to understanding animals. I have already mentioned that these are animal selfies in which an *animal face* is instituted – as in the following figures:

By 'animal face' I mean the effect of meaning when we recognize a real or realistically rendered animal head making facial gestures analogous to human facial gestures. Sometimes this is supported by the animal making similar bodily gestures. Both elements, the head and the face, are equally important here. For even though the animals are recognized as making facial gestures the way humans do, these are not human facial gestures – they are made by real or realistically rendered animals and thus depend on the physiognomy and the plasticity of particular animal heads and acquire undeniable non-human characteristics. And yet, despite

Figure 6

Figure 7

the fact that they are not human, the gestures are facial – they successfully constitute faces that are normally the privilege of human beings. These animal faces are equivalent to human faces in their meaning-making potential as exploited by the selfie genre.

Of course, this invention of realistic animal faciality is a human endeavour. The important point here is not some metamorphosis of the animal head in and by itself but the human willingness and ability to transfer to animals this 'materialised retention', this 'prolongation of the self' which is the face according to Marion Zilio (2018). By creating the conditions for this transfer, the selfie genre provides for a peculiar kind of encounter between humans and animals. As much as the selfie is a semiotic practice of the face, of communicating faces in different circumstances in order to foster different kinds of interpersonal interactions and ventures, when an animal is made part of this practice by acquiring a face, it follows that the animal also becomes an active participant of the aforementioned communication, the obvious physiological, cognitive and behavioural limitations of any such animal participation notwithstanding. In terms of textual meaning, it is impossible or rather irrelevant to consider selfies with faces of real or realistic animals as simple projections of human discursive categories unto animals. The difference that matters is not the one between humans and animals, but the one between animals without faces or with make-believe faces and animals with realistic faces taking part in communicative practices based on facial projections of the self. In other words, even if animal selfies are, in principle, a human endeavour, the introduction of animal faces intimates a new kind of partner for selfie driven interactions – an animal partner. In order to better understand what this development might entail, a brief consideration of selfies as a text-driven interaction is in order.

First of all, it is interesting to note a certain metaphorical quality of the novel experience of visual media as offered by the principal selfie gadgets thus far, webcams and especially smartphones. Because of the front-facing camera, the screen of these gadgets has become

Figure 8

Figure 9

an instance of the portable mirror: the process of video capture and streaming is so rapid that it feels like an instant reflection. But this is something else than a simple repetition of the traditional mirror experience, since the smartphone is also a networked device, allowing us to instantly share the aforementioned feeling of instant reflection – as if others could stand in our shoes. In selfies, others can share our feeling of having seen ourselves.

This makes the networked image-producing digital mirror quite different from the traditional mirror which, according to Lewis Mumford, for the first time provided an image of the self that 'corresponded accurately to what others saw' and revealed 'the self *in abstracto*' (Mumford 1955: 129), as an epistemic object of introspective knowledge. Because the smartphone produces visual texts, in it, we do not simply see ourselves just like others would; instead, in selfies we see ourselves the way we look in terms of an enunciative practice that we take part in and at the time of our taking part in this practice. In selfies, we do not share a simple well-defined image of ourselves. We share the way we are able to make ourselves seen under the confines of our circumstances as we live them. We share an enunciative practice – a whole practice and not just singular results, since selfies are indefinitely serialized – of showing ourselves from the perspective of our situation in the duration of our lives. Thus, the selfie is not a stable and objective surface from which we could abstract our inner self via introspection, or someone else's inner self via inspection. Instead of a common empirical facticity, we instantly share a process of self-imaging. From its very conception, a selfie is a way we enunciate our own situation in the world as it might be seen by someone – whoever is in the position of the enunciator – who wants to see it as his or her own, as we just have. The selfie is an emphatic practice, which arguably is no less binding than an epistemic object of knowledge. And since we cary our smartphones around everywhere we go, it is a practice of sharing experience, because it is always under some circumstances of our lives as experienced by us that we have seen ourselves and shared the way we have seen ourselves.

In media semiotic terms, networking and instantly sharing how we have seen ourselves

amounts to reducing the experiential distinction between the positions of the producer of the image and the spectator: networking and instant sharing establishes an equivalence between production and interpretation, allowing the spectator to identify with the enunciator's bodily, spatial and temporal circumstances. It is an extreme form of connectedness, making everyone's enunciative position potentially available for our taking in an instant, and our own position available for the taking by others. As Anne Beyaert-Geslin has put it, in contrast to autoportraits, selfies 'deny any memorial or historical function'; they 'shorten the temporal sequence as much as possible, [they] offer themselves to superficial attention and even deny any sort of pretension to posterity'; they 'insist on the present' and are even 'protentive' as they require a continuation and a response (Beyaert-Geslin 2017: 173, 174) This functionalizes the selfie mirror-image and makes it available for exchange: my face is there to offer a position I have taken; its particular qualities are not there for themselves and contemplation, but rather to suggest an immediate outlook on that position. Thus faces require to be 'read' and appropriated instantly.

This allows for extended animal participation via the animal face. As selfies are not concerned with introspective knowledge, we do not need to presuppose introspection in animal partners in order to acknowledge their capacity to take part in this practice. If taking a selfie is equivalent to having seen oneself in one or another way in the act of enunciation under some lifelike circumstances and having others see this sight as analogous to their own self-image, we are able to ascribe all of this to an animal as long as there is a gaze that we can interpret as a presence in front of the camera, a facial configuration and posture that we can interpret as an outlook on the way one has seen oneself with regard to the camera, a body that we can interpret as implicated in the act of enunciation and a set of circumstances that we can exchange for our own through the recognition of experience. On the basis of these elements, we are able to grant animals selfie agency and empathize with them. It is a peculiar case of empathy because in this case empathizing means sharing an enunciative position, a way of seeing and imaging oneself, which means that, to a certain extent, animals are acknowledged as enunciators who take part in generating meanings of texts and interactions driven by these texts.

Behind the face, a person

In order to better understand this kind of empathy, it is worth noting that in spite of all the instantaneity of producing and sharing selfies, we never see each other directly; there is no possibility to look our interlocutor in the eye. The most straightforward example of this must be the real-time experience of a video call. In a video call conversation, we can only look our interlocutor in the eye by looking into the camera eye. Which means that while the interlocutor is confronted by our gaze, we are looking nowhere, into a certain void required

by the technological setup itself. The same thing applies to selfies. This indicates a process of becoming-image that affects our persons both in real-time streaming and in instant sharing of still images: it is only as images that we encounter each other directly; any kind of personal involvement is oblique, indirect.

A Skype call screen is very explicit about this encounter in images. The screen comprises two boxes for streaming video: one shows us the interlocutor, and the other shows us our-selves, the way we are being shown to the interlocutor. We need to see both the interlocutor and ourselves in order to construct a conversation, which we do by staging our bodies in cer-tain ways – looking straight, sitting still, controlling posture etc. We stage our bodies as images on the screen in order to arrive at a shared enunciation, an effect of co-presence. In the terms used by Zilio (2018), we could say that the staging of our bodies with regard to what we see as images is a process of constructing our 'face-object', and, together, the interfacial space for a direct encounter. Once again, the face is instantly shared and not intended for contemplation or posterity. In this sense, the face-object is not finished, it is a dynamics of becoming-image that retains a connection with our our bodily situation.

This dynamics is expanded further by the sharing of selfies. Sharing selfies is not limited by a necessity to stay in front of the camera. Indeed, an encounter by selfie does not have a limit-ed duration: after you post your selfie on social media, it can be discovered there for an indefi-nite time to come. This makes selfies somewhat similar to deictic pronouns in writing. They are relatively independent of the embodied situation of enunciation in comparison to a video call, just like pronouns in writing are relatively independent in comparison with pronouns in spo-ken conversation which point to a particular speaker. But there is also an important difference, since linguistic pronouns in themselves are abstract (the meaning of 'I' in itself is tautological at best – 'I' is the one writing), while selfies are the epitome of particularity: they are the image of an actual someone, a person in the flesh, and thus always have a unique inherent semantic value – at least insofar as they include faces. In terms of meaning, the linguistic 'I' is empty and filled in by choice, while selfies are not. Selfies with faces are inherently meaningful deixes that depend on an indirect recognition of somebody able to project a facial presence from a multi-plicity of experiences but never exhausted by this projection – of somebody who is a person.[2]

Once again this is important if we acknowledge the invention of the animal face in animal selfies. If there is an animal face, then there is a direct encounter with a dynamics of becom-ing-image pertaining to an animal. Accordingly, it presupposes a possibility of an indirect per-sonal involvement, a recognition of an animal person projecting the facial presence in the im-age. This way, the animal face enables animal visual personal deixes with an inherent personal semantics. This entails a meaning effect of sharing experiences as well as enunciative positions. Of course, this is an effect of meaning that is accessible to humans rather than animals them-selves. But the way we understand animals must play some part in what they are, at least for us humans. In this sense, animal selfies might be considered as a minor site of a shift wherein real

and realistic animals are attributed a subjectivity and a personhood: first, they are conceived as actants-subjects capable of sharing their enunciative position; second, they are attributed an indirectly accessible being, a personality with a horizon of experiences.

As inherently meaningful deixes, selfies constitute a digital landscape of persons who find themselves in different circumstances. The circumstances range from the enunciating body in front of the camera to the place or the time of taking a selfie, to the body, time and space as represented and constructed (and perhaps enhanced) in the selfie. The human body and posture may be pretty, or attractive, or strong, or explicitly real, or funny, or just ordinary etc. With the animal face, the animal body also becomes a particular personal circumstance: the small body of Lionel the Hedgehog is able to sit in the palm of a human hand and feels incredibly light and merry (Figure 10); the body of a farm pig is huge and feels heavy; dog postures and expressions are very different from cat or rabbit postures and expressions.

For example, Esther the Pig (Figure 4) has rather small eyes and a relatively large head, which, together with an upwardly curved 'smiling' lip line, makes her look like she is squinting in a kind-hearted manner; on the other hand, Doug the Pug (Figure 11) has rather large round eyes and a relatively small head with a downwardly curved lip line and thus looks somewhat melancholic or maybe sarcastic. It is also a smallish animal in a large human world… Along with faces, the species-specific features of animal faces like the size of the eyes, ears, noses or snouts, the thickness, evenness and the tactile quality of the skin or the shape of the head play a role in constituting their personalities. The same principle of differences applies to spatial and temporal circumstances. Just like humans take selfies everywhere from their private bathrooms to exotic beaches, from their working hours to Christmas eves, so do animals appear anywhere, from zoos or human homes to farms or places of natural habitat, anytime from Christmas time to ordinary days.

Figure 10

Figure 11

These are cases of synchronic comparison. In a diachronic sense, selfies may be considered an element of a novel form of biographicity made possible by social media. In online personal profiles, intense processes of accounting everyday lives take place. Lee Humphreys has defined media accounting as 'the process of reckoning or providing evidence for and explanation of our presence, existence, and action through media' (Humphreys 2018). Series of photographs and text messages originating in ever changing circumstances spread out in a chronological order, connected by a more or less vague adherence to a 'profile' which makes all of them expressions of a moral entity. In personal profiles, because of its deictic nature, a selfie is perhaps the most poignant visual expression of the person as she is by and in herself. Selfies puncture the flow of images as the moments when one is most truly oneself, not hiding behind anyone else's gaze or the standards of professional portraiture (which does not mean there are no standards for making selfies). Selfies reveal and acknowledge the personal involvement behind a particular social media practice.

The diachronic dimension of social media is also another means to constitute and support the animal face. In animal social media profiles, even if more often than not they post regular portraits rather than selfies, repeated exposure to frontal photographs of the animal's posture and its head, together with captions commenting on the moment's mood or the thought of the day etc, habituate the spectator to recognizing different 'expressions' of the animal. Through these expressions, a face-object is constituted, as an imaged presence of the animal as enunciator. Accordingly, this presence indirectly intimates the animal's personal being behind the multiplicity of experiences. Thus, animal profiles are potentially no less biographic than human ones, and in this sense the animal face on social media is potentially a practice in animal biographicity, occasionally punctured by selfies as the most intense personal moments of animal lives.

Animal selfies and the modes of meaning and interaction. Manipulation: the animal partner

The animal face in selfies establishes animals as subjects engaged in networked practices of photographic enunciation and as instances of the cultural maintenance of personhood. It also implies a potential for animal biographicity and intimates a potential animal authenticity behind the image. Returning now to Landowski's modes of meaning and interaction espoused above, I will suggest that the animal face implies human-animal interaction in the mode of Manipulation. Having described some implications of interpreting human-animal interaction in this mode, I will further discuss how animal selfies might be interpreted in other modes, namely Programming, Adjustment, and Accident.

Manipulation is a mode that has its origins in the Greimasian canonical narrative schema,

where the actant-subject of the quest comes into actual being and is oriented towards and object of value by establishing a contractual relation with an actant-sender of some sort, who generally stands for a social or metaphysical order of some kind. Hence, the mode is characterized by mutual subjectivity of the partners of interaction: manipulation is only possible if the partners recognize each other as subjects possessing narrative, cognitive, pragmatic, passional and any other possible competences. Also, the partner must be recognized as someone capable of choosing and thus possessing a motivation and never completely predictable.

In the field of human-animal relations, this mode is perhaps most obviously exemplified by various animal rights movements: one of their guiding principles is indeed the recognition of subjectivity (sentience, pain, emotion, well-being) and autonomy to animals, going all the way to the concept of an animal person. As a political ideal or a utopia, this could be the mode of the animal-human, because the ultimate recognition of subjectivity to the animal may possibly translate into a recognition of animal humanity. Such might be a possible interpretation for what Giorgio Agamben has described as an attempt 'to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension [of the original suspension of the animal that institutes the exception of the human in the first place – *P. J.*].' (Agamben2004: 92) Since it is the human who is supposed to both risk his special ontological status and recognize the animal for an equal, this is possibly a project for an expansion of the limits of humanity.

But the animal face in selfies is a good illustration of how the recognition of animal subjectivity might be less about abolishing the conceptual gap at the foundations of self-conscious humanity and more about exploring animality through human aesthetic consciousness. The suspension of the suspension, if there is one in this case, is, then, an openness to intentional animal plasticity and corporeity, and an animal personhood which is not necessarily wholly predefined. Take, for example, the animal selfies made by the highly professional Allan Dixon (Figures 7 and 9 above, Figure 12, Figure 13 below). One can see very clearly how he achieves the effect of the animal face by mimicking the movements of the animal partner, especially movements of the mouth, but also posture, levelling, distance and moments of attention. However, it is just as important that the animal produce these movements, too. In cases of success, there is a suspension of a unilateral human-animal relation and we can no longer be sure who is mimicking whom. Of course, the selfie as product is Dixon's idea, but as far as faces go, how can we tell whether it was the animal or the human who smiled first? The animal did do something to produce a certain configuration of the frontal part of the head which under the circumstances of the genre – wholly intended by the human partner – we are able to recognize and interpret as a genuine animal smile. Thus, in a limited sense, the animal has co-authored the selfie.

Figure 12

Figure 13

It follows from this that the animal may be understood as looking at itself and sharing its enunciative position, which is something that happens in the course of a life trajectory consciously constructed by a subject. The deer in Dixon's selfie is not just an animal that he encountered and photographed; at the same time, it is also an animal that was going about its day when it encountered Dixon and took a selfie with him. The same goes for the dog in Figure 14. Together with the human partner, the dog is there near its or perhaps someone else's house, which in any case is a house that welcomes the two of them to be comfortable in its vicinity. It is one of these selfies where it is not that important to actually show the surroundings or the timing of its taking; the important thing is being there, wherever and whenever one is, and sharing this fact of being with others. By showing its face, the dog is doing this no less than its human partner – it is reminding others of itself, of its outlook upon its own life in the making.

Figure 14

Once again, I have been discussing an effect of meaning by which humans might understand animals as participants of interactions on social media, and not an animal cognitive capacity of some sort. This meaning effect of an animal life trajectory – a sort of animal everydayness and horizon of meaning – is a significant development in animal selfies as a site for the human understanding of animals because it opens up new possibilities of imagining, organizing and living animal lives.[3] As a mode of meaning, Manipulation is best understood as part of a dynamic system, together with other modes, namely Programming, Adjustment, and Accident. In this broader perspective, the exemplary animal face highlighted thus far is a peculiar case of a larger variety of animal selfies. In these other kinds of selfies, there are no faces: instead there are either ordinary animal heads and snouts, or different kinds of animal masks. Using Landowski's framework, I will describe these as different modes of a human encounter with animals or animality.

Programming: the distant animal

Let us proceed to Programming, a mode based on the principle of regularity. When an interaction is conceived in this mode, it is seen as a realization of a predefined underlying program that only needs to be executed, avoiding technical failure. According to Landowski, there are two types of regularity, causal and symbolic. As animal selfies are part of an interaction based on representational practices, it is the second type of regularity and thus a symbolic programming of human-animal interactions that we discover in them.

This animal selfie variety is akin to the more general and well-established production of certain types of narratives where animal figures are treated like costumes for inherently human characters, interests and passions (as in the proverbial fox being smart and the wolf being goofy or cruel). Symbolic regularity stems from sociocultural constraints, routines and automatisms. Animals or animality, in this sense, are vehicles for representing imaginary or mythical regularities of human behaviour. They are employed with regard to strictly human interactions and become instrumental. In this sense, there is no interference between the human and the animal, even if the animal is actually discovered inside the human. For example, such a relation is at work when explaining human behaviour in animalistic terms and considering men to be sexually aggressive and women submissive because they are 'male' and 'female'; or, when considering utopian or mythical men and women, like Adam and Eve, to have lived in a non-human state of perfection together with the animals, but still have had fallen because, indeed, their non-humanity was only an irretrievable origin of humanity. The important thing in these cases is that animality is rationalized or stabilized into a conventional morality (man and woman must be aggressive or submissive because of 'nature') or a mythical principle (animals are innocent, unlike man) that has nothing to do with actual animal presences. To stress

this exteriority of the animal to the human, I shall describe Programming as the mode of the distant animal.

In animal selfies, this mode is well exemplified by Figures 15 and 16: in the first one an animal makes up the objective background of a human situation; in the second, an animal constitutes a conventional envelope, an imaginary animal figure that stands in for a human experience. In both cases, the animal is used as a supplement to the human, as a sign indicating the wild and the untamed (but it might as well be the cute, the interesting, the strange, the funny, the exotic etc), as it is experienced by humans.

Figure 15

Figure 16

In Figure 15, the human subject is surrounded by wilderness, which has thus become a spatial circumstance of his enunciative act. The wilderness exotifies human life as reported by the selfie since it is a place where humans – the ones looking at the selfie – are not generally present. The animal is, thus, a conventional sign of a special occasion in a human life. In Figure 16, the animal is a metonymy for the technologically enhanced human ability to see the road. The boar is part of the road – an implication stressed by an almost camouflage-like colour and texture of the figure in relation to the background – and the human person is not, she is inside the car, looking at the road through the camera. In order to cross the road without undesirable perturbation, the human needs to avoid boars or any other animals, and the camera is a mediator that will allow the human to do this with less effort than before. All in all, the happy animal in this fictional selfie is a ludic imaginary expression of a human state of safety and relaxation.

I have described the animal of the mode of Programming as *distant*. It is a distance measured by essence: the human is real, and the animal can only be symbolic. In addition to the aforementioned examples, this mode also includes selfies of people holding their cats (Figure 17) or people wearing animal masks that hide the human face but at the same time amplify its humanity because they do not transform it in any way (Figure 3). In comparison to selfies with an animal face, the important feature of this mode is the absence of an animal enunciative po-

sition and personhood. Here, animals always stand in for something that is essentially human, as they are not ascribed a capacity to see or show themselves.

Figure 17

Adjustment: the present animal

In Landowski's systematic articulation, the mode of Programming is abandoned by passing to the mode of Adjustment. Instead of distance, Adjustment is based on immediate sensible presence, sensibility, and a dynamic acting-together of the partners of interaction. For the purposes of this paper, the passage could be explained as a modification of the conditions under which the human partner has access to the animal partner: in the mode of Programming, the animal is distant in terms of essence, to the point where an encounter in the strict sense becomes impossible; in the mode of Adjustment, on the other hand, the animal is *present*, it comes forth and makes itself felt, disrupting the essential distinction. Adjustment emerges as a rediscovery of animal existence that is able to permeate the human. It is a break with the programmatic principle of prefigured meaning for the animal and its non-interference with the human.

A possible example of such rediscovery is the perplexity of Jacques Derrida who acknowledges feeling ashamed when seen naked by his cat, but also ashamed to be ashamed, because in a more fundamental sense, 'the gaze called "animal" offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human' (Derrida 2008: 12). In other words, it is an inherently weird experience to see oneself seen by an animal, to rediscover one's human presence in the presence of an animal. This is not an experience that is reserved to philosophers: many of us have had milder versions of it when our paths have occasionally crossed with those of wild animals, whose gaze, body and disposition is always so different from our domestic animal possessions and friends. The experience is also possible in art. For example, *Untitled (Human Mask)* by Pierre Huyghe (Huyghe 2017) shows a macaque wearing a Japanese *No* theatre mask, a wig and a dress, exploring an

abandoned building. There are many aspects to this work, but seeing how what is indicated by likeness to be a human girl is carried into movement by the body of a macaque is indeed an impression in which the sensible presence of an animal corporeity breaks through the comfortable layer of what the animal signifies in conventional human terms.

And it is in an inherently artistic selfie practice that an imaginative rediscovery of animal presence is attempted. There is a peculiar carnivalesque subgenre of animal selfies that brings the animal forth and intentionally conflates it with the human, as much as possible with the means chosen. This happens in some selfies of people wearing animal masks. They could be called animal mask selfies, but there is an important distinction to be made first between different types of masks: the animal mask only brings forth the sensible presence of the animal in cases when it destroys the human face and replaces it with an animal head.[4] If the animal mask leaves intact the eyes, the mouth, the hair, the ears, the nose etc. (Figure 3), it remains decorative, it is 'just a mask', and instead of making us rediscover the animal it stresses the human behind it. If, on the other hand, the animal removes or transforms the elements of the human face in one way or another, then it conflates the human with the animal.

Such are the marginally popular horse and unicorn mask selfies in Figures 18 and 19. In their own carnivalesque way, these selfies are the contrary of the anthropopoietic animal face found in the mode of Manipulation – instead of the animal face, they make use of the zoopoietic human head, i.e. a human head that has become animal. Of course, this is a ludic confrontation on imaginary grounds – in these masks, there is no sensual relation to actual animal corporeity, just a sort of absurdist figurative play that fuses imaginary human and animal corporeity. Hence, the procedure is not as dramatic as the aforementioned philosophical inquiry. But it does disrupt the conventional use of animality for predefined signification, and opens up to an immediate encounter between the human and the animal in the imaginary sphere.

Figure 18   Figure 19

With regard to other animal selfies, this absurdist procedure is a denial of the exclusively human character of enunciation. It debunks two mutually reinforcing selfie conventions: the proverbial use of animals as vehicles for human experiences and the belief that the only possibility for humans and animals to actually interact as peers is for the animals to acquire faces. As the animal head mask dominates the human body, it reminds us that the symbolic usage of animality is potentially disruptive no less than it is reassuring of humanness. And as the animal headmask visually destroys the human features of the face without, however, annihilating the selfie itself, it reminds us that the selfie face is actually a construct, a face-object and is not the only way to embrace animality.

Accident: the pure animal

In Landowski's systematic articulation, Adjustment is succeeded by the mode of Accident, based on irregularity. According to Landowski, the impossibility to control (by programming), to negotiate (by manipulation) or to affect (by adjustment) anything under this mode is not wholly negative but can be taken advantage of by various kinds of positive practices, both scientific, like mathematical probability, and superstitious, like amulets, talismans, incantations etc. Such practices have recourse to Programming or Manipulation in order to produce either programmed accidents, where irregularity is subjected to a peculiar kind of prediction, or motivated accidents, where a volition is postulated beyond any access by negotiation or contractual relations (Landowski 2015: 65–71).

In terms of general tropes of the human-animal relation, Accident is perhaps best exemplified by the pure animality that emerges from the infinite and forgotten depths of the human. It may be an instinct, an outburst of rage, a rush of energy or perhaps a serene sheepish calmness and ignorance that overwhelms the human and takes control. Such pure animality may take various guises, but they are all united by the more abstract movement in which the animal, a completely uncontrollable force, emerges from inside the human. But pure animality is not always disruptive. Sometimes, the human is already disrupted by some other forces (society, physical disability, mental illness etc.) and is actually aided by the animality that takes over. A case like this is evoked by Alphonso Lingis in *Fantasy space*, where he quotes from a letter, written by a man suffering from a very painful degenerative nervous disease:

> I have animals in me, the stallion as well as the plowshare horse (my legs) the white crane, the great blue heron, and a multitude of underwater aliens, that will tolerate abuse for the sake of love. [...] Then the Wolverine and the Tiger both took over and I became so powerful, so able to withstand the pain, enjoying the power, watching with fascination in the mirror my body change into unhuman shapes. (Lingis 1998)

Unsolicitable and unpredictable, animality emerges from the depths of human fantasy and corporeity in order to help the person for whom 'regular humanity' is of no use anymore. The animal shows itself despite the human that is deficient. This kind of animality is beyond humanness, but, by contrast to Programming, it comes extremely close to the human; in fact, it institutes itself at the very center of the human person.

In animal selfies, the workings of the pure animal are once again less dramatic, but they do provide the ground for a special type of human-animal interactions. We could divide animal selfies under the mode of Accident by the two types of accident mentioned above, programmed and motivated. The programmed accidents in animal selfies concern those selfies which are taken by animals themselves under circumstances pre-arranged by humans: such are the famous macaque selfies taken with the equipment of David Slater (Figure 1 repeated below), or this 'elphie' made by an elephant using a camera belonging to Christian LeBlanc (Figure 20).

Figure 1

Figure 20

In most of these animal-made selfies, despite the animal head being fully present, there are no animal faces such as presented in previous chapters.[5] But even if there is no animal face in these animal-made selfies, there is an obvious animal act of enunciation and thus an enunciative position taken by an animal. The difference that the absence of a face makes is that the selfies do not present an enunciative position that could be shared with a human spectator. Without a face, the animal in a selfie remains inaccessible; it emerges from its inaccessibility as a glimpse of real, pure animality. And yet these photos are selfies nonetheless (see the discussion in part 1). This contradictory configuration provides for a catastrophic value: the animal intrudes into 'human media', reminding humans of hidden dimensions behind the usual 'human' circumstances of space and time. Such are animal selfies in the mode of programmed accident.

The motivated accident in animal selfies takes the guise of a contemporary practice of animal totems. The most characteristic instance of this practice are Snapchat animal filter selfies. The filters are augmented reality tools that add to the face of the user different animated animal body parts, or transform parts of the human face to make it look animal-like. The filters suggest adding animal ears, a nose, a tongue, a mouth, enlarging one's eyes (to make them cuter) and enhancing the skin. Here are some of the possible results:

Figure 21

Figure 22

Figure 23

In contrast to the different kinds of masks discussed above, and to the selfies taken by animals themselves, the transformation of the human face as an effect of meaning is a revelation of an inner animality of the human person. In most cases, it is a cute animality; but, as Figures 21 and 22 demonstrate, cuteness can acquire rather different undertones, such as horribleness, ugliness or weirdness. In this case, animality is not so much a fixed sign of cuteness (this would be a case of symbolic regularity), but an aid in expressing the more-than-human, less-than-human or other-than-human character of one's personality. The human subject cannot program the effects of this aid or negotiate with the animal agent, because it is anonymous; it only works by way of a minor catastrophe which is the sudden intrusion of animality upon the human face.

In terms of human interactions with animality, this is a significant choice for the human partner, because he actually risks compromising the recognizability of one's person. In other words, one risks losing one's face to the animal. Just like in the familiar tropes of 'uncontrolla-

ble rage' or 'wild desire', the pure animal in these selfies acts like an anonymous amplifier that is able to suppress whomever is making use of the amplification. As it amplifies the human person with certain animal characteristics, it also dehumanizes it. At some point, we can no longer be sure whether this is a person anymore. In this sense, animal filter selfies are the spatial opposite of accidental selfies taken by real animals: the latter introduce animality as something exterior to the human selfie sphere, wheras in the former, animality requires to be accepted as something interior to the human act of enunciation, posing the threat of a disintegration.

Final remarks

In the course of this article, I hope to have demonstrated two things. First, that the animal selfie is a complex phenomenon. For one, studying it requires at least some presuppositions about what a selfie in general is and how it means anything; but then it is also important to see how varied animal selfies are in their own right. While selfies with animal faces seem to me to be the most significant development so far, some of the other types are just as interesting, like the amimal selfies based on transformations of the human face, for example. Also, the types described here might undergo further developments – or a lack thereof, which might be reason for a more value-driven critique than the description presented here. With the fate of animals on the planet ever more uncertain, using such developments as the animal face for easy-going entertainment purposes only might not be the most commendable choice and could thus be the point of departure for a more radical semiotic thought.

Second, I hope to have shown that animal selfies, despite being an enterntainment-driven practice of representation, are a legitimate site for looking into human-animal interactions. A semiotics of animalhood is potentially important both for the broader culture and for semiotics itself, since nowdays, following the heightened interest in the universally human during the last century, we are faced with the novel demand to better understand our humanity in a broader ontological framework. Hopefully, further explorations of new media phenomena like selfies will also open some revealing vistas in that regard.

NOTES

1 The effect can also be found beyond the selfie phenomenon. Motion captured and computer animated realistic animal faces have become somewhat prominent in films, for example, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011, dir. Rupert Wyatt), *The Jungle Book* (2016, dir. Jon Favreau), *Mowgli: Legend of the Jungle* (2018, Andy Serkis).
2 An interesting creative exploration of this problematic on social media are the online profiles

of artificial persons, such as *lilmiquela* on Instagram. Miquela calls herself a robot and posts snapshots, portraits and selfies with a computer-rendered realistic human face. With continued posts accompanied by textual pronouncements, a non-human personality has emerged that does not seem all that different from the personalities found on the profiles of real live people. On the one hand, it is a character like thousands of others in literature or the cinema. On the other hand, it is a being that is not confined to any textual space or time – its face can wear many appropriate bodies photographed anywhere in the world, thus allowing Miquela to travel, go places, meet people, in other words, have an indefinite multiplicity of experiences.

3 This last part works both ways, because on the one hand, the animal that has a life integrated with social media is cared for in a different way than an animal that is not, at least in terms of activities in which it is invited to participate; on the other hand, the human partner maintaining the social media profile of the animal is also living a different, much more 'animal' life from someone who does not partake of such activities.

4 It is not in the scope of this article, but these selfies should probably be considered in light of what Gilles Deleuze has written about the face and the head in the works of Francis Bacon.

5 It might be possible to argue that David Slater's macaque selfies are a liminal case because of the animal itself: the physiognomy of the macaques has allowed the capturing of expressions that are selfie-face-like in themselves and, to a limited extent, they have made the selfies themselves. This case should be discussed in a separate paper. For the purposes of this paper, I will consider them as no-face animal selfies.

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