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From Technology to Iconophilia**

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## **Selfies: From Technology to Iconophilia**

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### **Abstract**

Studies on computer use as a technological instrument of communication have received widespread criticism in terms of the distance between "real life" and "virtual life." As a matter of fact, we are no longer consubstantiating an individual in social networking websites: instead, we are playing the role – a *persona* – of someone who chooses to be positioned within a particular social networking service. I agree on the fact that we are not showing ourselves as we really are in the social networking websites, but rather appearing as the one we want to show off before somebody else's eyes. This does not mean that language is unavailable for the relationship between people and groups. In this vein, "selfies" are not what is usually known as the imprisonment of the self. I prefer to believe that selfies compose a contemporary form of iconophilia. In the case of selfies, the computer would be the shareable territory for the distribution of the sensible and for social interaction.

**Keywords:** selfie, social interaction, iconophilia., cyberculture

## Introduction

Considering *selfies* as a main focus of analysis, we initially agree that in social networking websites we do not conceive the individual. We rather represent a *persona* that chooses to be positioned in a certain social networking service, not displaying who he or she is, but what he or she wishes to be before the Other's eyes. Therefore, the recognition of a pictorial body, a *selfie*, would not presuppose a face-to-face interaction between interlocutors, but rather an interaction between subjects before (outside) the screen and the ones inside the screen. For subjects outside the screen (a Skype conversation, for instance), which is nourished through social networking websites, this characterizes a cultural moment known as cyberculture (Lévy, 1993). Our proposal is that *selfies*, under the apparent static condition of the image, stand for a cultural practice, thus establishing what we are prone to call *actual virtuality*, even when it experiences communicative adaptabilities (Mey, 2006).

Therefore, we have traced an argumentative track that begins with the sense of selfie and its cultural role. Next, we demonstrate its *habitat* in cyberculture, which obtains feedback in the cyberspace in search of sociability – or social interaction. Lastly, we demonstrate that the machine-computer instrument is not placed like a prosthesis for the development of human skills, but is truly a practice/innovation within a complex cultural set that represents what we call *iconophilia* (Maffesoli, 2012), and not narcissism in the society of spectacle. It is a kind of:

analysis of (...) [selfies], produced within the scope of a given culture, with the possibility of establishing a dialogue between the rules and codes of such a culture. Images can be used as means of access to modes of understanding and interpretation of standpoints on part of subjects and of the cultural webs within which they are inserted (...) the ways to look at something result from a given cultural and social construction, (...) provoking new ways of interaction and sociability (Barbosa, 2006, p.20).

## Image: *Persona*, *Selfie*, *Narcissus*

We have already considered that virtual world inhabitants are *personae*. This means that the qualities that sustain a representation of an individual – in this case, in the virtual screen –, which would turn the individual into a *persona* (person), could be explained by its own etymological sense:

The word “person” comes from a Latin origin. In its stead, the Greek had *prósopon*, which means *face*, as in Latin *persona* means the *disguise* or *outer appearance* of a man imitated on stage. And, sometimes, more particularly the part that *disguises the face as a mask or face guard*. (...) So a person is the same as an *actor*, either on stage or in *current conversation*. And *personifying* is to *represent, either oneself or someone else*; and about the one who represents another [and oneself] it is said that such is the holder of his or her *person, or the one who acts in his or her behalf* (Hobbes, 1983, P. 96) (italics added)<sup>1</sup>.

What philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) reminds us is that the individual is in disguise and starts to play the role of an actor of himself. In his germinal sentence, the author

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<sup>1</sup> Translation made from the Brazilian edition.

also supports our argumentation as he states that "what is perceived by my senses is the only thing to exist"<sup>2</sup> (Hobbes, 1983, P. 9), which means that we can only acknowledge something in the exterior world from the sensorial impressions that we have about such a thing. Is it not true that the sense of vision, among others, such as emotion, lead us to have impressions about a selfie that I receive in my smartphone?

In modern nomenclature, the sense of selfie travels through various contexts of use. For a start, we have the sense of selfie as "an English word, a neologism derived from the term *self-portrait*, a picture taken and shared over the Internet." It is no wonder that the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) (2014) picked selfie as the word of year in 2013 – "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website" –, although it has been on the loose in the world since 2002, presumably used for the first time in a conference in Australia.

If its use started as a teenage fad of taking pictures of themselves, nowadays it has gained broad use, either to be shared on social networking websites (Instagram, Facebook, Orkut, Myspace, etc.) or for private use. Even without the intention of sharing on social networking, selfies can be shared among the people photographed, thus keeping the sense of a self-portrait taken by one of the persons appearing in the selfie, by using the technological device known as smartphone.

A good example of the diverse ways followed by a selfie is the event in which the Prime Minister of Denmark, Helle Thorning Schmidt, makes a selfie with the President of the United States, Barack Obama, and the British Prime Minister David Cameron, at Nelson Mandela's funeral, on December 13, 2014. As the newspaper story puts it, "the 'selfie' features a sign of the times concerned with behavior in the era of social networking"<sup>3</sup> – a selfie that becomes a piece of photojournalism, a photo-selfie released over the Internet and the printed media.

**Figure 1.** Photo sequence shows Prime Ministers and Obama posing for a selfie



Source: Newspaper *Estado de São Paulo*, December 14, 2014, p. 7.

Image by Mariana Congo. <http://www.significados.com.br>; access on: September 18, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The use of a few statements made by Hobbes is not intended to the configuration of its philosophy, which proposes, for example, the adhesion to the central power to achieve peace. Likewise, it is not in the least intended to the separation between man and object, being object outside the subject – "In regard to the thoughts of man, I shall consider them *isolatedly* and, next, *in chain*, or dependant on each other. The use of the germinal sentence by Hobbes is an argumentative resource that leads to another proposal of sense. The focus is not on Hobbes' philosophical background, which separates the subject from the object – mainly because the use of some author's quotation (Hobbes, in this case) is the presence of a new authorship (the writer, in this case). (See Derrida, 1999, citationality).

<sup>3</sup> <http://economia.estadao.com.br>

It is important to point out that most selfies are based on appraisal: it is either the importance of people posing beside the self-photographer or the self-photographer posing beside important people; the importance of the moment that one intends to record or share; the valuation of personalities as a marketing strategy; or the self-appraisal of ordinary people posing beside celebrities, thus registering the relevance of the experience. Examples of these various appraisals of importance are given below:

a) Celebrities and ordinary people

**Figure 2.** *Jolie at the 'Unbroken' premiere. Angelina Jolie and the cast of "Unbroken" step out on the red carpet for the world premiere in Sydney. They pose with various fans for selfies*



Source: <http://www.smh.com.au>.

b) Celebrities among celebrities

**Figure 3.** *Masterstroke. A selfie involving celebrities headed by TV presenter Ellen DeGeneres [center, wearing white] at the Academy Awards. Even as a marketing strategy for a brand of cell phones, it became the most commented in history: 500 million tweets*



Source: Folha de São Paulo Newspaper, Caderno Especial, December 29, 2014, p. 8. <https://folha.com.br>.

4) Ordinary people at an event

**Figure 4.** On a day with an “all-time record of selfies” [opening of a subway train line in the City of São Paulo] at the Fradique Coutinho Subway Station. The new site becomes a leisure attraction. Passengers making a selfie in the new subway station



Source: Folha de São Paulo Newspaper, November 16, 2014, p. A14. <https://folha.com.br>.

Hobbes, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, speaks of a presentation – in our case, an image-portrait – as a performance in itself. The contemporary selfie continues to privilege the management of self in the self-image, which leads us to the myth of Narcissus (Brandão, 1991; Grimal, 1979), who died looking at himself. He was so handsome that Tiresias, the most renowned soothsayer in Greece, proclaimed in a prophecy that Narcissus "could live a long life in case he failed to see himself" (Ovidio, 3, 339sq.).

Should three argumentative positions differentiated through time – Narcissus/Ovid in the first century<sup>4</sup>, *Persona*/Hobbes in the eighteenth century, selfie/Internet in the twenty-first century – have any common point of union and reasoning as to be placed in this segment? It seems that the proposal of Maffesoli (2012) – “time returns” – is made real: from Narcissus into *persona*; and from *persona* to selfie.

### *The Body*

The notion of body we approach is the one of an *identity body* – which we refer to as *selfie-body* – intended to be transmitted to one *Other*. It appears from three perspectives: *corporality*, *corporeity*, and *corporification* (Martins Ferreira, 2011; Souza, 2006). According to Martins Ferreira (2011), *corporality* is connected to the body itself, the flesh touched by emotion; it is “the body that produces text through the energy of this body’s vital movement.” *Corporeity* has an iconic relation between the sensitive, carnal body, and the image that is cast forward from it; it is “the body as image, reference or inspiration, indicated in descriptive processes or plastic modalities that retrieve the image of the human body figuratively or as much as to dilute bodily references to a smaller or greater extent”; at last, a body image that projects sociocultural ideas from the daily life inhabited by such a body. Together with corporeity – expressive values of the body in its exteriority – is *corporification*, which appears as “the construction of a bodily score” within a sociopolitical scenario whose body moves in a connotative manner: performing, building, and demanding ideological-political-social meanings.

In this conceptual triplet, the selfie expands the senses of a body represented on screen. Through corporality, the bodily physicality is found in the “virtual” space and, even if it is not touchable, the emotion is somehow depicted there (joy, sadness, etc.) through its “almost-

<sup>4</sup> The indication of the first century refers to Ovidio's life time, from 43 B.C to 17 A.D., but it is common knowledge among historians that his work *Metamorphosis* was made public in Year Eight, i.e., in the ninth century.

presence” (Lévy, 1996); through corporeity, the plastic modalities depict the lines of an existential construction, a chosen self-portrait to be transmitted and shared over the social networking services that represent a temporal moment; and through corporification, the continuous changes and re-shapings of the self-portrait demonstrate that they have been built within a specific social, as well as temporal, context.

It is in the expansion of senses from the body-selfie that its *superexposure* is to be found, configured as a means of power inasmuch as it mirrors “the position occupied within a given social dimension” (Sobrinho, 2014). This is because, as an image is posted, the selfie plays the role of being seen and recognized by the Other – gaining visibility and offering the body publicly as a means for attaching importance to one's own existence. For Maffesoli (2000.p. 15), “whereas the individualistic logic is supported by a separated identity that is closed in itself, the person (*persona*) only exists in the relation established with others.” As Lévy (1996, p. 33) puts it,

The contemporary body is similar to a flame. It is often tiny, isolated, separated, and almost motionless. Later on, it run outside itself (...) works like a satellite, launches some virtual arm high in the sky, along networks of interests or communication. It then attaches to the public body, burns under the same heat, and shines with the same light of other bodies in flames. Transformed, it then returns to its almost private sphere, and so onwards, sometimes here, sometimes everywhere, sometimes in itself, sometimes mixed<sup>5</sup>.

And we shall not forget that “the virtualization of bodies experienced today is a new stage in the adventure of self-creation that sustains our species” (Lévy, 1996: 27). Therefore, it is a matter of actual virtualization because image projection does not only stand for *tele-presence*, but also as *almost-presence* (Lévy, 1996, p. 29).

## Cyberculture

After traveling through the making of *selfies*, it is necessary to inscribe the selfie-act in its cultural context – cyberculture –, where time and space, especially cyberspace, present their communicative specificities through social networking.

Willing to argue that cyberculture is a means of culture, *i.e.*, a practice experienced within a given historical time and space – contemporariness, in this case –, we must pick a few concepts to make a processual-comparative work of the concept. This comparison involves common sense in the media, anthropologists, cultural studies scholars and historians, and political theorists:

- (1) Through the media's definitions of common sense, one is able to invoke the concept of culture as a wide complex that includes knowledge, art, beliefs, law, morals, traditions, and all habits and skills acquired by men, not only as members of a family, but of society<sup>6</sup>;
- (2) Through the voice of cultural anthropologist Lévi-Strauss, culture is “a set that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, traditions, and many other skills and habits acquired by men as members of a society” (Lévi-Strauss, *apud* Mello 1986, p. 397). Additionally, through Luiz Gonzaga de Mello (1986, p. 398), culture is defined as a complex process that can be

<sup>5</sup> This quotation was translated from the Brazilian edition.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.significados.com.br/cultura>.



summarized by “something that people create in a concrete way in their daily and social lives”;

- (3) Among several scholars concerned with Cultural Studies, William and Thompson (cf. Escosteguy, 1998) argue that culture is a network of practices and relations that make up daily life, in which the role of the individual is in the foreground<sup>7</sup>;
- (4) Political theorist Frederic Jamenson (1994, p. 30) further states that “culture should always be seen as a vehicle or a means through which the relationship among groups takes place.”<sup>8</sup>

None of the postulates above eliminates the others. On the contrary, they create an expanded semantic field: “*relationship* among groups” leads to “a network of *practices* and *relations*,” which refers to the ways that “people *create* in a concrete way their *daily and social lives*,” as well as the “skills and *habits acquired* by men as members of a given *society*.”

Is cyberculture positioned outside these notions of culture? Or could one consider that cyberculture is an expanded sense of culture? It seems that it is rather an expansion of daily-life habits – the use of technology as a means of communication. The space of groups and relations is formed inside what is called cyberspace: a “communication space opened by the global *interconnection* of computers and computer memories” (Lévy, 1996, p.94) (italics added). In other words, “what was once internal and private becomes *external and public* (Lévy, 1996, p.73) (italics added). As the ideas of connection, links and group are formed in the cyberspace, such culture gains the attribute of “cyberspace culture” or “cyberculture.” After all, Lévy (1999, p.17) does not deny that cyberculture is another form of culture or, even better, a culture organized by “a set of (material and intellectual) techniques... And practices, attitudes, ways of thinking, and values developed along with the growth of cyberspace.” It is through the continuous expansion of such a space that one reaches the idea of social networking – external and public –, which “congregates several people and groups maintaining relations among each other” (Sobrinho, 2014, p. 2). In this *cyberculture*, social interaction is made possible through a “*cyberspace* (or *network*)... [which] is a new means of communication originated from the global *interconnection* of computers” (Sobrinho, 2014, p.2) (italics added).

Cyberculture as a categorization appears only to specify a historical moment of great technological development, which “asked for” a new designation of culture as new communicative ingredients, such as social networking, globalization and deterritorialization, were added along with a “group of autonomous participants, uniting ideas and resources around shared interests and values” (Marteleto, 2001, p.72).

In addition, a new categorization can be thought of due to the strange feeling towards the movement of time and space within the cyberspace and the physical space, which oscillates between an infinite *expansion* and *compression*. In the expansion of limits, one gains access to the global dimension – a simple click takes me to the space and time *China*, for example. Conversely, in compression, the global dimension is cut, returning to the chronological time and space where interlocutors before a computer screen lose contact with the global: a blackout happens, the computer crashes, the network fails. In other words,

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<sup>7</sup> It should be remarked that Thompson resisted to understand “cultural” as a global way of life.

<sup>8</sup> The proposition of Jamenson saying that “the relationship among groups should always refer to fight or violence” (1994, p. 30) does not take part of our argumentative interest. Jamenson's fragment is translated from the Brazilian edition.

A subject willing to enter cyberspace is required to be in locality, that is, before the computer, at home, for instance: the *locality* – the place of the machine – is what leads to the global action, but its operation can fail due to an overloaded wire, a badly installed program, and so forth (Martins Ferreira, 2006, p. 89).

Another perspective applied to the notions of *compression* and *expansion* – chronological time and online time – surrounds the access to information through the input/output processes in the cyberspace, as explained before:

the so-called “online” information (that is, [when]<sup>9</sup> directly accessible) is usually divided into small standardized modules. The access is made through an entirely *selective* way – not a *continuous* one – and *one gets to know only what is searched for*. The database content is used, though not “read”, in the proper sense of the word. (...) The notion of real, as devised by IT professionals, summarizes well the main feature, the spirit of computer science: *the condensation in present time*, in the ongoing operation. *The operational-type knowledge provided by computer science is in real time*. In that regard, it should be opposed to hermeneutical as well as theoretical styles. (...) Analogous to the circular time of primary orality and the linear time of historical societies, we could speak of a kind of chronological implosion, an accurate time established by computer networks (Lévy, 1993, p. 44-115) (italics added)<sup>10</sup>.

The previous postulate by Lévy (1994) offers a few argumentative improvements:

- 1) There is an obvious difference between *linear time*, which I situate within the local space; and *non-continuous time*, which I place in the cyberspace, but one does not exclude the other. The linear time is present as we find ourselves somewhere typing on a keyboard, that is, in the operational process provided to us by the machine. The non-continuous time occurs when we select online information – for example, as we visit the Louvre Museum webpage, in Paris, finding ourselves in the very room where the Mona Lisa is exhibited, by means of a *chronological implosion*, which allows us to be so far away in such a single moment.
- 2) In the *condensation of present time*, the local present and the global present cannot be denied. However, the notion of present time can be categorized by two measures: the *instant* and the *right now*: “The *instant* is a point from the *right now*; the moment of a touch, an almost-touch – owing to its briskness –, never in tangible permanence. The *right now* is a temporal, linear, accountable, tangible process that inhabits the present time” (Martins Ferreira, 2006, p.96). Even if one is willing to reduce the complexity of a temporal network, in which both global and local times are unequal – whether simultaneous or not, acting one over the other or not –, the relations are concerned with subordination: “its power is unequal: cultivates simultaneities or enhances dis-

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<sup>9</sup> The inclusion of “when” in the quotation is due to the cyberspace input/output issue, as it is not always possible. Local conditions will determine such possibility, regardless of the global power exerted by computer science. It is appropriate to mention a researcher known to us, who was ready for a conference about cyberculture. She was setting the computer to show a Youtube presentation about cyberspace. The local space defeated cyberspace as a connecting device failure deemed it impossible to finish the presentation appropriately – both Power Point and online access were not to be reached.

<sup>10</sup> Translation made from the Brazilian edition.

simultaneities" (Baitello, 1999, p.117). According to Bauman (1999, p.20) it is "the time of communication *imploding* and *shrinking* towards the insignificance of the *instant*, the space and space delimiters are no longer important, at least for the ones whose actions can move at the speed of an electronic message"<sup>11</sup> (italics added). Referring to the space issue, Bauman (1999) relates locality to community and globalization to association. Social networking services are explained as associations as they "configure an aggregation of comrades that become partners in the *creation* of a group around a common interest" (Martins Ferreira, 2006, p.88) (italics added). Community also indicates a group, though not as a result of some "creation," but rather an agglomeration of subjects who "naturally" form a nation (Martins Ferreira, 2006, p.88).

- 3) Even when thinkers such as Paul Virilio (1999) propose the absence of "presence" in virtualization, neither time nor space are annihilated, as virtualization "invents, in taste and risk, qualitatively new speeds, mutant space-times" (Lévy, 1996, p.24).

Even in this process of possibilities regarding differences in real/virtual, instant/now, time/space, cyberculture can be called *actual virtualization*, because it takes part in our daily life and our routine cultural practices. In this way, social interaction is made real in every prerogative.

## Social Interaction

### *Communicability*

Thus far, free of paradoxes, we have been able to assert that "society cannot be understood or represented through its technological tools" (Castells, 1999, p.43), because such tools are found in practically every human activity, which generates other ways of sociability.

In the field of culture and communicability, we praise Walter Benjamin (*apud* Martín-Barbero, 1997, p.72) as he states in relation to routine practices as culture that "thinking over the experience is a way to catch up with what emerges in history through the masses and the techniques." Meanwhile, other thinkers have a more pessimistic idea regarding technological development, as they stress the domination of technology over the subject that makes use of it: "The levels achieved in each country [Latin America] through technological expansion in the field of communication differ greatly, but the fascination and the dazzling effect are very similar (...) there comes a *compulsive* need for microcomputers, webcams, videogames and videotexts" (Martín-Barbero, 1997, p.253) (italics added). On the other hand, other thinkers, as Walter Benjamin (2001, p.180-181) himself, understand communication as an existential journey, where world and subjects are not separated in the interactive practice: "Who does man communicate with? Who does the oxcart driver communicate with? And the mountain? And the fox? This is the answer: with man. It is not a matter of anthropomorphism. The truth of this answer is made clear through *knowledge*" (italics added). It is through the practice of such knowledge – technological, in this case – that communicability appears. Communication and communicability are pairs that complete each other, In communication, the computer-machine plays its communicable role; and in communicability, the technological knowledge and its

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<sup>11</sup> Translation made from the Brazilian edition.

application by subject-users take action towards an interaction established between subjects, machine and subjects, and machines.

### *Interaction*

The sense of interaction has been largely explored by diverse frameworks of thought (interactionism, dialogism, social psychology, face-to-face interaction, etc.). However, what piques our interest for this issue is to evoke meanings that cope with the fact that in cyberspace interaction is processed within social relations. "Interaction is the field where social relations are updated and reproduced, and also constitute a space for games where invention and interchange can be introduced, and where a new social [relation] is found at every moment."<sup>12</sup> In the selfie-act, interaction would be a way to continuously test the conception that each subject has about the other's role. Therefore, would selfie be a form of social interaction in which the Other is so important as to reveal the *body-selfie*?

### **Final Considerations**

The choice for studying selfies was aimed at deconstructing the determinism (Castells, 1999) that often revolves around technology: the annihilation of communication between subjects face-to-face; being a prosthesis that would imply a dysfunction that needs to be replaced; and the selfie-act as a narcissistic practice. It is obvious that every fascination does not last forever as in fairy tales. Therefore, technology could be considered as a *phármakon*, acting as *poison* on one hand, and as *remedy* on the other (Lévy, 1999). As *poison*, it would attest to the slavery of man to the collective intelligence at the cost of individual intelligences of each subject. However, the selfie is also a *remedy* that aggregates individuals to social networking services, who are willing to share common interests, where the Other attests to his existence. In addition, technology can be considered poison "for the ones who do not take part of it and remedy for the ones who dive into their own whirlwinds and manage to control their own drifts in the middle of their torrents" (Lévy, 1999, p.30).

Selfies do not stand for the narcissistic poison, which is able to kill, but rather for a proposal of iconophilia that belongs to a post-modern culture. We love images; we want them as witnesses to our existence and to our daily practices. The *mis en scène* of self is not the imprisoning of self. As Maffesoli (2012), I prefer to believe that the path followed by the selfies composes a contemporary form of iconophilia. It implies a tribal narcissism, not an individual one, because tribal communication [social networking] facilitates sharing tastes (sexual, musical, religious, and so forth), and thus being acknowledged by the Other. As selfies are *inside* the technological machine, the computer would be the territory - or cyberspace -, whose social networks feed communicability and social interaction.

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<sup>12</sup>New Portuguese Language Spelling Agreement. Porto: Porto Editora, 2003-2015. Available at: [http://www.info.pedia.pt/\\$interacao-social](http://www.info.pedia.pt/$interacao-social); access on March 7, 2015.

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