

MEDIATED SELF AND SUBJECTIVITY. SELFIE AS A NEGATION OF ALTERITY CINDY SHERMAN, INTI ROMERO AND MASSIVE AUTO-PHOGRAPHY

Marilyn Argyrokastriti

PhD Candidate, Department of Audio and Visual Arts, Ionian University,
maargi17@yahoo.gr

Abstract

Selfies are assumingly the medium of transmitting into the world our identity and subjective viewing. The instagrammers though, have become a commodity through the branding of themselves, instead of being one person's eye into the world, or the marking of a personality in time, as self portraits once were. The specific aesthetics they promote have become an Instagramism as Lev Manovic puts it in his latest book on the Instagram, in the same way as we would talk about Impressionism or Surrealism a solid imagery that is, corresponding to specific iconological and formalistic norms.

The mediated self and the making of subjectivity go a long way back, in the process of hominisation and the intersection of becoming a subject and technics (Stiegler). This ontological analysis of subjectivity corresponds psychoanalytically also to the Mirror Stage (Lacan) with the Mirror being a technema, a technological achievement (P. Rigopoulou). Interwoven, subjectivity and technology demonstrate the progress in enhanced subjectivity. The selfies regardless being a technological medium coincide in their diffusion and mimesis, with subjection, not by chance, in the root of the word subjectivity (Butler). Subjection to a stereotype, conformity and annihilation of the Other (Baudrillard) and Difference (Deleuze). The artists Cindy Sherman and Inti Romero consider the selfies in a critical manner with Sherman transforming herself in an ironic edited persona and Inti Romero adding pixels to her photos, in an attempt to conceal the selfie focus.

Keywords: *digital culture, Inti Romero, selfies, Cindy Sherman, subjectivity.*

Introduction

In his latest book on the Instagram, Lev Manovic refers to the term Instagramism in order to refer to the world wide tension of taking and sharing photographs through the social media platform, that have a particular style ideology which could constitute a theory in the same way, as we would talk about surrealism or impressionism.

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That style theory is reproduced through the successful instagram profiles providing them hundreds of thousands followers, creating a wave of imitators and finally developing the instagram language or to put it in Mac Luhan's words creating "the medium that's the message". Continuing in the same book, Manovic refers to the Instagram aesthetics, as an aesthetic not belonging to the arts but to the commercial goods promoted through the various intagrammer profiles, and he refers to this aesthetic as not being part of the Society of the spectacle as Debord would sustain, but as an aesthetic society confined to its self. To this claiming I would like to differ using the situationist collective Tiqqun later in my presentation.

Subjectivity

Since we are talking about the social media transmitted self it would be very interesting to analyze briefly the ontology of subjectivity as a byproduct of technology as Stiegler puts it in *Technics and Time*, as referred to, in the book *Life after the new media* by Sarah Kember and Zoanna Zylinska. Stiegler talks about our being with, and emerging from, technology as subjects and technical beings, referring to the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus as included in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*. As Kember and Zylinska mention "Technology is positioned here as a force that brings man forth and is fully active in the process of hominization: it is not just an external device that can be picked up, appended, and then discarded at will".

So in Stigler's words human becoming and technics are one and the same. As a reference for this quote, in the myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus (the two gods assigned with endowing animals with survival qualities), arrive to man with no qualities left to give in order to protect himself. Epimetheus fault is to be compensated by the stealing of fire and *techne* (art, technique) from Athena and Hephaestus by Prometheus and his offering them to humans. In this way names were invented and things were created. Or as Stiegler has it, "the being of humankind is to be outside itself," the always already technical human is a human that is inevitably, prior to and perhaps even against his "will" — productively engaged with an alterity the ground for the formation of subjectivity I add.

The formation of subjectivity in Lacan holds a great interest for our research, since in the lacanian theory the subject becomes such in the infantile age, during the process of the mirror stage. The infant recognizes itself in the mirror as a whole, but in reality it has a fragmentary auto perception of its body, since it still doesn't hold full control of its body parts. This leads the infant to enter the Imaginary stage (the other two being the Symbolic and the Real) and get ahold of a specular image. The mirror stage and Narcissism (libidinal investment on the Ego, instead of an object) share a lot in common, but the special interest is held for us in the fact that the mirror is "a work of art, a technema, a technological achievement and at the same time a symbolic work" as Pepi Rigopoulou states in her book *The Body*. We are having a link here with the prior assumption with Stigler's point of view.

In Deleuze – Guattari's schizoanalysis there isn't a soul that speaks, an unconscious

that dictates as Colebrook analyzes in *Understanding Deleuze*. There's a fragmentary "body" the parts of which fulfill the orders of the Law, the Father (in the Lacanian sense) or the hyper ego that transfers the ethics of the social complex." The mouth judges through speech, the eye controls and the mind limitates". In the selfies we have the fragmentation of an interrupted body, an ideal (in its edited edition) presence. These fragmented bodies through auto-photography are members of a solid big body, that of the medium itself, the face presented is nothing but a repetition, a mirroring of the same represented idol. So in the selfies we are probably having the representation of a specular ideal self, a subject striving to identify with the Imaginary representation as a paranoid command.

Butler in "The psychic life of Power – Theories of subjection" mentions that the word subjection means both submission and subjectification, a binary meaning used also by Foucault in order to talk about biopower. Therefore subjectification in itself has no autonomy in the social field. How could it have in the highly normalizing field of the social media and especially instagram?

Alterity in this way, through the aesthetic leveling of the medium, is being annihilated via the uniformity, and the voice of the medium becomes the voice of the norme, a dictation filtered through not only in its iconological sufficiency, but also in its optical communication via the filter processing of the image. But in a homogenized (digital of real) reality what happens with the image of the Other? The Other targeted by seduction and the Other we should not be affiliated with since it is the main bearer of the Difference referred to by Baudrillard but also Deleuze in his encomium of Difference. Other and Difference are the foundations of identity.

Imagery of the Selfies

It is time now to enter the aesthetics of the selfies. In his article "The Mutant Cute: Meitu, the Selfie, and the Rewriting of Global Identities" Patrick Lichty describes a project of his, called *The horror of the Gaze* in which he would use the Meitu a Chinese application for beautifying photographs of pirated facebook photos, or even fellow academics photographs in order to explore what he called the Augmented Selfie. Identity politics, global "cuteness" standards and intercultural problems, politics of "whiteness" arose since the application had algorithmic standards of "cuteness" deriving from the asian beauty ideals and stereotypes (paleness, large eyes, infantilization).The very familiar feminist concept of the male gaze in the arts and the spectacle, " is being here substituted by a self – reflexive machine gaze" as Lichty writes.

In that same context let's focus on the work of Cindy Sherman and her instagram profile where she manufactures her selfies using the application facetune with often grotesque results. Cindy Sherman in the oeuvre that made her famous in the 70s and the 80s would use in an almost cinematic way, images of various types of women that she would imitate as a scenery in order to narrate the female status and identity. Secretaries, housewives, and celebrities would be the syllabus in pictures, for the female representation in everyday life. In her Instagram profile though, she critiques the way

in which we edit our pictures with an irony for the so called natural and healthy look we aim to create, (natural being the young, the rosy cheeked, the shiny complexion and the flawless features, wrinkle free. Nothing natural about it). These Cindy Sherman selfies can be considered a fruit of post internet art, an art that is inspired by and referential to, the digital culture, and foremost the internet and our lives within it. Cindy Sherman refers to social media as being vulgar in an interview of hers in the Guardian, and perhaps this vulgarity she tends to bring into the light with her selfies. Especially when she draws a clown face and claims to be a makeup artist or when she paints her face green and asks for a detox. The words she uses as captions for her selfies describe the emotion of the scene with perky being, pink, large eyed, full of giant lashes and glossy lips. In theory this would be the perfect Kardashian selfie had it not been so frightful! In other selfies we have the so called lustful look, the inviting pose to an unknown audience. A full exposure to desire but with deformed cheekbones, contracted eyes, half open mouth surrendered to the Valentine the caption refers to.

On the other hand Inti Romero creates selfies she pixelises, towards anonymity and non recognicity of the person represented. We are being informed on her identity by the networking we witness, the responses she gets from her “friends” the information she shares. The face remains the most valuable of her personal data, the best hidden part of her sharing with the public. Yet this project is mostly revealing about the way we live in the internet creating and transmitting our identity that doesn’t really connect to the others, remaining a rizhomatic (anarchic and random) network rather than an arboreal (hierarchic) construction if we want to use the Deleuzian concepts. Goffman the great theorist of Identity stated in 1959 that we have different faces, for our different interconnections, our identity being a performance in different settings

Brooke Wendt in her book *The Allure of the Selfie* states in conclusion that “All of our selfies look almost identical on Instagram, which illustrates the power that the camera and the network have over us; it seems that this connection is so strong that we will our selfies to the program without a second thought, and we relinquish our personal distinctions, our identities, to be seen on Instagram. Ubiquity, although it is inherent to photography, is not inherent to identity, and it appears that we have yet to make this distinction for ourselves. We find our selfies in multitude more compelling, and more valued, than a thoughtful, single representation of ourselves.”

The selfies in their multitude, this massive data of photographed faces and bodies, have become a uniform product, which just happens to depict a person. The likes being the currency of this transaction, transform themselves some times in real life money. The “influencer’s” market the popular profiles that is, is a branding field with pretty much the same characteristics (how odd, to have products based on their similarity instead of their uniqueness?)

What have these “products” in common? The glossy image of an ideal representation of femininity, of being into this world, of giving the consumerist society an altar to worship, that of the goods as displayed upon the young bodies. In Tiqqun’s book *The Preliminary Theory of the Young Girl*, the young girl isn’t a gendered stereotype but the symbol of a society surrendered to consumerism and spectacle, which invests to the

young girl as being able only to consume and not produce. This young girl theory, could apply to both men and women if they are being submissive enough to the success narrative. Consume and be consumed.

As Tiqqun put it: “In reality, the Young-Girl is simply the model citizen as redefined by consumer society since World War I, in explicit response to the revolutionary menace. As such, the Young-Girl is a polar figure, orienting, rather than dominating, outcomes. It is very impressive that a book written in 1999 is so applicable to Instagram even though, it should come as no surprise since it refers to the dictations for the Young Girl prototype, provided by the women’s magazines and the media. Today each Instagram profile could be acknowledged as a personal medium in surface, but it is a massively guided channel in deeper analysis.

Beaudrillard in Screened Out writes:” What we look for today, where the body is concerned, is not so much health, which is a state of organic equilibrium, but fitness, which is an ephemeral, hygienic, promotional radiance of the body - much more a performance than an ideal state — w hich turns sickness into failure. In terms of fashion and appearance, we no longer pursue beauty or seductiveness, but the ‘look’”.

And he continues: “All we can do is remind ourselves that seduction lies in non-reconciliation with the other, in preserving the alien status of the Other. One must not be reconciled with oneself or with one’s body. One must not be reconciled with the other, one must not be reconciled with nature, one must not be reconciled with the feminine (that goes for women too).Therein lies the secret of a strange attraction”.

For the purpose of this research I have made a connection with the Tiqqun texts and real Instagram photographs I randomly collected through hashtags such as girl, beauty, body and so on. They serve as really matching captions to the photographs they accompany.

Illustrations

Sindy Sherman



Inti Romero



1. 2.

Tiqqun – Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl

1. THE YOUNG GIRL CONCEIVES HER OWN EXISTENCE AS A MANAGEMENT PROBLEM THAT IT IS HER JOB TO RESOLVE

Address on 20
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2. "ARE YOU OK WITH YOUR BODY? IS YOUR YOUNG CARCASS DRESSED IN GRACEFUL CURVES, WELL MAINTAINED? IS YOUR FRAME SOLID? THE LININGS SILKY? ARE YOU IN GOOD SHAPE?" THE YOUNG GIRL PRODUCES HERSELF DAILY AS SUCH, VIA THE MANIACAL REPRODUCTION OF

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Address on 200

3. THE YOUNG GIRL NEVER GIVES HERSELF. SHE ONLY GIVES WHAT SHE HAS, WHICH IS TO SAY THE ARRAY OF QUALITIES THAT THEY LOAN HER. THIS IS ALSO WHY IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO LOVE THE YOUNG GIRL, BUT ONLY TO CONSUME HER.

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Address on 7

4. HOWEVER VAST HER NARCISSISM, THE YOUNG GIRL DOESN'T LOVE HERSELF. WHAT SHE LOVES IS "HER IMAGE", THAT IS, SOMETHING THAT IS NOT ONLY FOREIGN AND EXTERIOR TO HER, BUT THAT POSSESSES HER, IN THE FULL SENSE OF THE WORD. THE YOUNG GIRL LIVES UNDER THE TYRANNY OF THIS UNGRATEFUL MASTER

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Address on 181

5. "ME & MY BREASTS, MY BELLY BUTTON, MY BUTT, MY LEGS: A JOURNAL OF MY BODY" THE YOUNG GIRL IS HER OWN JAILER, PRISONER IN A BODY-MADE-SIGN INSIDE OF A LANGUAGE MADE OF BODIES

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Address on 150

6. THE YOUNG GIRL IS OPTIMISTIC, THRILLED, POSITIVE, HAPPY, ENTHUSIASTIC, JOYFUL. IN OTHER WORDS, SHE SUFFERS

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Address on 125

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