



Enchantments of Selfie-Camera: A Critical Study of Hyperreal Social Media

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomenon of the human search for immortality, eternal youth and universal beauty, in short, posthumanity through self-simulation in the hyperreal world of social media. Created by the technology of the front ('selfie') camera of smartphones; refined by filters; and propagated by social media platforms; Postmodern humans have become mesmerized by their digital hyperreal 'selves'. Applying Baudrillard's theory of 'Simulacra and Simulation' and Haraway's theory of 'Posthumanism' to existing statistics on 'selfie' culture and social media, this research investigates how individuals and societies are embracing simulated realities on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Tik-Tok, YouTube etc. It shows how the instant gratification offered by posting pictures of the self that one knows are heavily altered and serve no purpose other than gathering appreciation; and appreciation of the same by others who are well aware of the artifice and purpose (or rather, purposelessness) involved; shows not only a collective acceptance but also celebration of the 'fake' or 'artifice for artifice's sake' in the postmodern world (in direct contrast to modernism's Promethean quest for meaning in truth and truth in meaning). It shows how this phenomenon is a part of the global movement towards accepting digital hyper-reality as having equal, if not more significance than tangible 'reality'; and creation of a race of holographic posthumans via digital body-modification with Faustian disregard for what it means to be 'human'.

Keywords: Hyper-real, Posthuman, Selfie, Simulation, Social Media

Commodification and Marketing of the Self

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.

(Haraway, 1991: 150)

Jenks proclaimed the modern world to be a “seen phenomenon” (2). The twenty-first century individual and society both seem to be, instinctively, well aware of this with the unspoken dictum being ‘I am seen, therefore I am.’ The very first decade of the twenty-first century, with the advent of social media platforms such as Orkut, Facebook and LinkedIn, seemed marked by the subliminal decision of the individual and collective conscious, subconscious and unconscious to present an idealised ‘I’ so that it can be idolised by the self and others in contrast to the factual ‘I’ with its many ‘imperfections’ (or to be more accurate, deviations from what is perceived as being ‘perfect’.) While almost all individuals who photograph themselves nowadays use some form of cosmetic surgery, makeup, clothing, posing, lighting, filters, editing and so forth to make themselves ‘look better’, a significant number of social media influencers have begun using these techniques to the extent that they remain scarcely identifiable as humans, leave alone remaining identifiable as themselves. For instance, in the image given below, a Twitter user shows how social media star Khloe Kardashian has ‘enhanced’ her image.

While this is clearly a manifestation of the human superego designed to propagate a culture of ‘excellence’ and ‘aesthetics’, it clearly has a pluripotent negative affect on the self-esteem of individuals and values of societies. Socially, the dictum is fast deteriorating into ‘I show, therefore I am’ or what is termed in modern slang as ‘flex’ culture in which individuals feel pressured to not only present an idealised, fictionalised version of themselves on social media platforms but also to reinforce this myth of the self by presenting it again and again, preferably in a variety of versions through repeated posts of photos, videos, etc., for consumption by others and their own

selves. Mehdizadeh finds individuals higher in narcissism and lower in self-esteem were related to greater online activity as well as self-promotional content (357).



Figure 1. George Stark, “Khloe-Kardashian’s Filter Fail EXPOSED!”, *The Daily Mail*, United Kingdom (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk /tvshowbiz /article-8628811/Khloe-Kardashians-filter-fail-EXPOSED-Fans-call-reality-star-heavily-altering-selfie.html>

This commodification and marketing of the self as an act of careful production rather than a natural state of being has been exposed in the second decade of the Twenty-first century with social media ‘influencers’ (or individuals with large following on social media) being ‘exposed’ by others or even showing themselves in ‘before or candid’ and ‘after or processed’ images. For instance, the image given below of social media star Trisha Paytas, used in the

YouTube video “Instagram versus Reality” (released on 9 May 2019) made by h3h3Productions, was initially released by Trisha Paytas herself on her (now disabled) Instagram account, as a confession of how she uses camera tricks, filters and editing to ‘enhance’ her image.

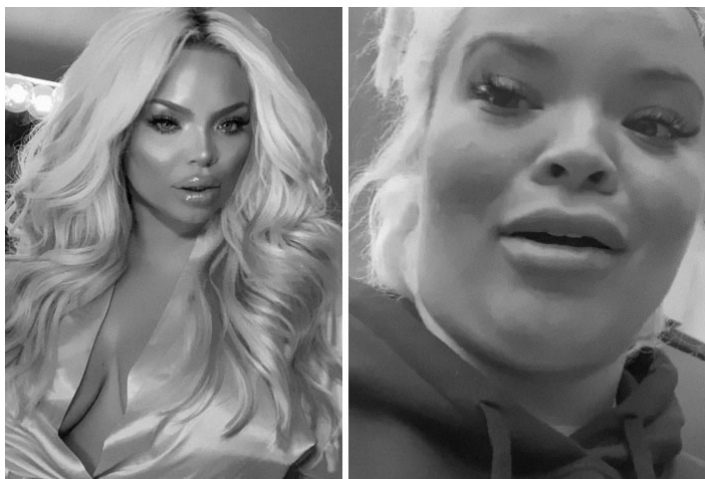


Figure 2. Trisha Paytas, Instagram @trishapaytas, 2019.

Trisha Paytas responded to the controversy surrounding her highly processed images by releasing the unapologetic YouTube video “I Hired people to Photoshop Me “Hotter”” (released on 6 June 2019) which blatantly acknowledges her desire and documents her efforts to be further photoshopped rather than deny or express regret at any artifice.

This trend of unapologetic artifice may be seen across social media platforms in the form of write-ups, photos and videos that demonstrate “amazing photoshop transformations/ tutorials”, “how to catfish on Instagram/ Snapchat/ Tinder etc.”, “instant makeover”, “instant glow up filter” and so forth. Interestingly, the ‘ugly’ ‘before’ images, after initial expression of shock/outrage by the

viewers, are now seen as trophies, the ‘uglier’ the better, so that the influencer’s art of self-presentation can be fully appreciated by everyone. For instance, the YouTube video “20 Ways to Look Amazing in Pictures” which uses a thumbnail with a ‘wrong/ unattractive’ ‘before’ and a ‘right/ attractive’ ‘after’ photo side by side for the viewers to judge the difference for themselves and appreciate the extent and art of artifice in image, has over 7.1 million views. Another example may be seen in the YouTube video “Best Photo Retouching Photoshop Tutorials” which proudly displays an ‘unattractive’ ‘before’ and an ‘attractive’ ‘after’ photo side by side on its thumbnail, celebrating what appears to be the racial transformation of a person from brown to white, has garnered almost 3 million views. Similarly, the YouTube video “HOW TO TAKE (or fake) THE PERFECT SELFIE” has managed to capture public attention and approval, as evidenced by its 5.3 million views. Aside from these few examples, there is no dearth of material celebrating the extent of difference between ‘before’ and ‘after’ in selfies which are doctored in some way or another; and the number of views of such material allows us to quantify and judge the extent to which the public accepts and appreciates this art of illusion. This trend subverts the traditional regard for the ‘real’ and disdain of the ‘unreal’ by replacing it with a regard for the ‘unreal’, while being fully aware of its ‘unreality’ and celebrating it as an alternate to, or even a vast improvement over, the ‘real’. The ‘unreal’ has become the new socially-celebrated sublime, with sublimity within reach of any individual at the touch of a few buttons, via the employment of a few ‘apps’ (or software applications) such as Adobe Photoshop.

Wittgenstein declared that “a picture is a fact” (Jenks1) and with the blurring of the traditional dichotomy

of 'fact' and 'fiction', the 'selfie' has become an increasingly complex signifier replete with a highly dubious signified. Experiencing the rise of the digital self, or the storage of an idealised version of the self in a digital medium, poses a few conundrums for the cultural studies theorist. Is this simply a trend, the rise of which had been predicted by Jean Baudrillard or is it something deeper, as thinkers such as Murray (2015:1) suspect when they pontificate if the compulsion to self-image and self-edit is simply narcissism, or a form of subconscious, aesthetic resistance against centres of power which also, traditionally, tend to be the dictators of meaning and value?

This paper confines its study to smartphone self-portraits, or 'selfies', which, while ubiquitous across social media platforms and well-researched from psychological and sociological perspectives, remain neglected by literary critics. It attempts to bridge this gap by examining the phenomenon of the human search for immortality, eternal youth and universal beauty; in short, a kind of posthumanity (as defined by Donna Haraway in her essay 'The Cyborg Manifesto'); through self-simulation in the hyperreal world of social media. This posthumanity, which Haraway envisioned as being available only to a cyborg; an entity she defined as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism" (1991: 149); is now becoming a hyper-reality through the agency of the selfie which is steering humanity closer to its ancient Promethean goal of becoming super-human/ divine. These 'cyborgs' or compound hyper-real creatures of social reality and social fiction; are a manifestation of and a relatively safe outlet and refuge for both producers and consumers of selfie images; originally incubated from 'reality' and subsequently, isolated from that very 'reality', these

‘cyborgs’ have emerged from the realm of science fiction into the territory of self-fiction and self-narrative which is now widely appreciated and accepted by society as a social fact. Blurring the boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ (Grinds, 2010: 44), the cyborg also represents the ultimate union of the self with the ‘other’, a long-cherished dream of the human spirit in quest of superhuman surrender:

The term self-portrait first appeared alongside the birth of Humanism in Western Europe and was a result of the artists ‘recognising themselves’ as individuals... In the networked self-portrait, the textual manifestation of the self is based on process rather than final product and the ‘true’ self loses relevance. (Avgitidou 131)

Selfies may be euphemised as a form of creative self-representation and self-assertion created by the technology of the front (‘selfie’) camera of smartphones; refined by filters; and propagated by social media platforms. Proclaiming that postmodern humans have become mesmerized by their digital hyper-real ‘selves’ is in no way hyperbolic. While this phenomenon may seem sudden and unprecedented to society at large, this train of thought and chain of events had been prophesized by the Twentieth-century literary philosopher and cultural critic Jean Baudrillard in his theory of ‘Simulacra and Simulation’. This theory applied the semiological (sign) theory to elucidate how commodities, media, and technologies create a hypnotic multiverse of illusions and fantasies for individuals and societies. It is therefore pertinent to apply the ideas postulated by Baudrillard to the literary analysis and interpretation of this phenomenon.

Furthermore, Haraway's theory of 'Posthumanism' suggests that in order to be truly emancipated from modern and even postmodern 'grand narratives', individuals must have fluid identities such as that of the cyborg. "The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self." (Haraway 163) As the cyborg is void of innate biology, it is also liberated, by default, from the biological ideas of male and female; human and non-human; animate and in-animate. It is a rejection of existing gender, species and subject/ object boundaries and identity politics and instead encourages plurisignificant identities. This paper employs the 'Simulacra and Simulation' theory given by Jean Baudrillard and the 'Cyborg' theory given by Donna Haraway to the experiential phenomenon of 'selfie' culture to interpret the latter as a vital act of resistance in pursuit of the human ambition for perfection, everlasting youth and eternal presence/ existence.

A Hyper-real Democracy: The Willing Objectification of, by and for the Subject

Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and the succeeding studies in *Simulation and Simulacra* prophetically theorised; well before the advent of the personal computer in offices and homes, rise of the internet or invention of social media platforms; that human society is becoming a vast simulation where identities are construed by "the appropriation of images, and codes and models" (that have little to no relation with the original or 'real') to manifest new paradigms of individual and social perception.

Baudrillard envisioned a 'primordial soup' of postmodern hyperreality in which the bits and bytes of communication, entertainment and information

technologies would spontaneously co-lace into conglomerates which would provide experiences more involving, intense and 'significant' than those of everyday 'real' life. The digital revolution that would come would change not only the way an individual lives but also the way he/she thinks by mutating him/ her into "a pure screen, a pure absorption and re-absorption surface of the influent networks" (1988: 27).

Baudrillard believed that the individuals and masses of the postmodern world would seek presence over origin, text over context, icon over signification, spectacle over meaning and ultimately, absence over presence. The "implosion" of the masses into a "silent majority," signifying "the end of the social" (1983) signified the beginning of the end for Baudrillard who viewed this, what he believed to be the imminent future, with grim dismay. In *The Perfect Crime* (1996), Baudrillard posited the belief that the drift toward virtualization in postmodern 'high-tech' digital societies seemingly aims to erase all the imperfections of human life and world but in reality, what it is actually covertly accomplishing is the elimination of reality itself. This is what Baudrillard termed as 'the Perfect Crime'.

Time has proven Baudrillard correct but the loss of stable meanings, hierarchy, and difference into a "black hole of non-differentiation" has definitely come with distinct advantages. The 'selfie', while a façade fabricated by personal mythology fused with prevalent societal ideals, is highly problematic in creating distorted versions of the 'real', it is also, in many ways, a Great Equaliser. Anyone with a smartphone and access to an internet connection can digitally manifest and promote his/ her idealised self without any economic, social, political, historic, geographic or biological constraint. The selfie is thus not

only an image but also a sign (that is a signifier duly coupled with signified meaning which is, in this case, largely assigned by the creator of the selfie) and a spectacle for mass consumption. It has the power to make the individual trans-class, trans-political, trans-sexual, trans-species and so forth; in short, 'trans' in any and every sense the individual chooses. Imagination is now the only barrier to the individual who has, in hyper-reality, achieved unexpected democratic freedoms hitherto unachievable in the 'real' world.

Baudrillard himself in his later works seems to have realised this for he explicitly stated that now that the 'real' has been stripped of a stable, universal and fundamental meaning; and thereby lost its value; affirming meaninglessness is vital for recognising the unreality of reality and thereby, inherently liberating. "If we could accept this meaninglessness of the world, then we could play with forms, appearances and our impulses, without worrying about their ultimate destination..." (2001: 128). This is precisely what selfies are allowing individuals to do, without the individuals themselves realising. For the first time in human history, the individual is firmly in charge of his/ her history, biology, context and self as text. Moreover, although the charge is firm, the labels remain fluid enough to allow for a posthuman erasure of human differences, epistemologies and hierarchies.

The selfie as an act of resistance may be seen as an instrument of liberation from existing societal norms via the act of Seduction (as explained by Baudrillard in his 1979 work, *Seduction*, published in English in 1991). Baudrillard was quick to observe an "immanent reversal," of phenomenon during the late 1970s, the most significant part of this reversal being that societies traditionally based

on production were transmuting into those based on the slippery and elusive cornerstones of simulation and seduction. In *Seduction* Baudrillard wrote, seduction does not overtly undermine, subvert, or transform existing social relations or institutions; but is a soft alternative of artifice, appearance, play, and challenge against the existing systems of production and domination.

The drugged mesmerisation with image/ spectacle is, according to Baudrillard, menacing as it causes meaning (which is based on stable boundaries, fixed structures, shared consensus) to disintegrate by making the referent, context and reality itself, amorphous. As simulations proliferate, they cease to be a copy of or to refer to an 'original'. They become what may be understood as copies of copies, referring only to their own selves, becoming akin to images reflected by carnival mirrors which reflect distorted images projected from other mirrors, to omnipresent digital screens and screens of human perception, which in turn place these images in context of other stimulatory images." This spectacle, Baudrillard believes, causes the masses to lose sight of their essence and grand dreams of liberation, and revolution, content by allowing for their replacement with a pleasant inundation with hyper-reality.

Baudrillard in *Fatal Strategies* expresses apprehension regarding the proliferation of the 'objective', surpassing all attempts of the 'subjective' to understand and control it. However, while Baudrillard has been able to predict, with chilling accuracy, the onslaught of the human race with digital hyperreality, the culture around us today is testament to the ability of the 'selfie' to allow the individual subject to, via hyper-real objects (the fictionalised 'selfies') assert his/ her sense of identity, creativity and ambition for achievement, appreciation and

immortality through images over which he/ she has complete control during production, editing and initial publication. It is a vital tool for grounding the individual in a sense of self which need no longer depend on existing meanings. Rather, new identities and meanings may be generated by the individual which may become a part of collective consciousness if they manage to become 'viral'. No longer does society need to depend on a canonical or mystical dictation of meanings. It can choose to make 'viral' what meanings resonate with the collective ideals of the space-time zone in question, without fear or favour, thereby creating a more authentic hyper-reality as compared to the traditional, ideologically manipulated reality of the pre-postmodern eras.

The 'Selfie': The Unassuming Guise of Individual Quest for Posthumanity

Additionally, Haraway's idea of reconstruction of identity, devoid of naturalism and taxonomy and defined instead, by affinity is reflected in filtered selfies, especially Snapchat filtered selfies that enable individuals to change their gender or depict themselves as common animals like cats/ dogs/ rabbits or even fantasy creatures like fairies and witches.

Haraway insisted that anyone could choose to remain outside the bounds of any category or choose to join/ construct his/ her own groups and change their choice as frequently as they wished to instead of being bound by traditional and antagonistic binaries such as human/ animal, male/ female, black/ white, young/ old, 'beautiful'/ 'ugly' and so forth. "A cyborg body... does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms..." (Haraway 180).



Figure 3. Helin Jung, “What Your Favourite Snapchat Filter Says About Your Personality”, *Cosmopolitan*, (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/lifestyle/a4963105/snapchat-filter-personality-test/>

Haraway’s vision, while still far from practical implementation in the ‘real’ world in letter and spirit, seems to be alive and thriving in the hyper-real world through the fluid consumption of selfie filters and the use of self ‘avatars’ (animated/ caricatured/ animalised/ fantasy versions of selfies). The reduction of the three-dimensional self to the two-dimensional selfie is rather an enhancement and an “act of resistance” (Murray 2015) against socially established and approved norms of appearance, behaviour and their significance. The consistent re-invention or destabilisation of the self-image is vital for the consistent re-establishment of the individual and social understanding, questioning and re-formulation of the self as text and the society as contexts.

As Haraway notes, “Communications technologies... are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations... enforcing new meanings...” (1991: 164). Above all, long after the flesh body is gone and the ‘real’ disappears, the hyper-real images/ videos of the self will persist, assuming the

position of ‘representation of the ‘real’’, despite commonly understood knowledge of their mythological/ fictionalised origins. Thus, the final frontier, the final challenge facing humanity, that of imminent ageing and death has disappeared. No longer does the human race need expensive and rare sculpture/ portraiture to preserve itself. No longer do progeny need to be produced in quest of genetic immortality. No longer does one need to thirst after elusive name and fame or toil to produce some knowledge/ artifact of use to posterity to be remembered by posterity. Digital eternal youth and digital immortality have already become accessible to us all, provided that we document ourselves adequately, using the appropriate angles and filters, during our lifetimes and ensure that these are available on a variety of social media applications and devices.

Conclusion

Selfies are not only a simple yet effective tool for ‘‘documenting’’ the self (Jenks 1995) but have also spearheaded a ‘‘socio-cultural revolution’’ centred in ‘‘identity affirmation’’ (Silvestri, 2014: 114) through hyper-real identity creation. They are a political convergence of the object and subject of photographic practice (Olszanowski 2014) and a neoliberal, narcissistic yet socially normative way of ‘‘self-branding.’’ (Mehdizadeh 2010) While selfies are critically understood as ‘‘visual probes’’ of ‘‘depicted realities’’, they are not invalid repositories of online self-representation and identity narration.

Rather than an act of self-criticism, highly fictionalised self-portraits may be seen as an act of self-love, self-expression, self-propagation and self-regeneration. The kaleidoscopic possibilities offered by

selfies are encouraging individuals to explore themselves with a new, fluid ease that allows for ever-increasing 'play' of personal representation. While the hermeneutic debate around individual instances of selfies may continue, selfies and self-modification through selfies are now undoubtedly an inseparable part of the human experience of life. To see and be seen; to document and be documented; to edit and be edited on whim and fancy without 'real-life' struggle or consequence; to fictionalise and be fictionalised; to experiment; to represent; to dissent; to transcend; to manipulate ideals, ideas, individuals, masses, space and time; and many such-like seemingly outrageous human desires are all being fulfilled in relatively harmless yet powerful ways via the agency of the humble selfie.

To conclude, selfies are a pathway to re-discovering and re-defining our human experience devoid of pre-existing notions. In societies filled with 'real-world' inequalities of gender, income, nationality, race, species etc., the selfie may be seen as one of the few ways of bridging these gaps. The instant gratification offered by posting pictures of the self that one knows are heavily altered and serve no purpose other than gathering appreciation; and appreciation of the same by others who are well aware of the artifice and purpose (or rather, purposelessness) involved; shows not only a collective acceptance but also celebration of the 'fake' or 'artifice for artifice's sake' in the postmodern world (in direct contrast to Modernism's Promethean quest for meaning in truth and truth in meaning). A grand new collective unconscious has formed with greater tolerance, if not appreciation of imagination and creativity. It shows how this phenomenon is a part of the global movement towards accepting digital, hyper-reality as having equal, if not more significance than

tangible 'reality'; and creation of a race of Holographic Posthumans via digital body-modification with Faustian disregard for what it means to be 'human'.

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