



Digital Representation of the Fragmented Self through the Lens of Reification: A Cultural Examination

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Abstract

In literary and philosophical theory, the term ‘reification’ describes the conversion of abstract concepts like consciousness, identity, or spirituality into concrete things. Reification entails considering abstractions as commodities that can be valued, measured, and traded, in contrast to symbolism, which only symbolises an idea. In Marxist ideology, especially in the writings of Georg Lukács’, ‘reification’ refers to a twisted perception of reality in which people are reduced to objects and these very objects possess agency and influence over people. In the modern digital era, this process has been greatly accelerated via social media sites where people create almost fake identities by using morphed digital representations. These digital artifacts have now become markers of a person’s worth and social existence, and have almost replaced genuine human experience. Self-objectification has become a prevalent aspect of the present digital society and only filtered and manipulated versions of reality are valued in comparison to authentic self-expression. This phenomenon fragments the holistic aspect of the human experience by encouraging people to see others and themselves through an objectifying lens. According to reification theory, there is an increasing inclination towards favoring representation over reality in the current digital era and the remedy lies in engaging critically and consciously with digital technology: online content should be seen as a representation of the self and not a reality of the self.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Digital Self, Georg Lukács, Marxist theory, Postmodernism

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Introduction

Reification in the context of literary and philosophical theory may be understood as the representation of an abstract concept, such as consciousness or God in the form of a material object. It is different from symbolism in that it implies not merely representation but rather, commodification of abstractions into things that may be measured, priced, bartered and/ or sold. The value of these objects is subject to market forces of demand and supply (both natural and artificially generated) and consequently, the inevitable fluctuations in value. In Marxist thought, reification signifies a (fallacious) way of interpreting the world in which objects are misrepresented and consequently misinterpreted as subjects; and subjects are misrepresented and misinterpreted as objects; with the result that subjects are rendered passive or determined, while objects become animated as the active, determining factor. For instance, Petrović defines reification as, “The act (or result of the act) of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties, relations and actions of man-produced things which have become independent of man and govern his life. Also, transformation of human beings into thing-like beings which do not behave in a human way but according to the laws of the thing-world. Reification is a ‘special’ case of alienation, characteristic of modern capitalist society” (Petrović 411).

Reification and Georg Lukács

This idea’s most significant early presentation may be found in Georg Lukács’ 1923 essay ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,’ which was published in his book *History and Class Consciousness*. He noted that while it seems patently obvious to the logical mind that some ‘things’ such as desire, happiness, love, and so forth, cannot be concretised, valued and bartered/ sold/ bought; Capitalism’s drive to create markets and commodities to exchange in those markets leads society as a whole and individuals as its units, to reify such abstractions and fetishise the resultant commodities. These ‘commodities’ are invariably highly visual in nature so that they can advertise themselves and attract potential consumers. More the visual appeal, more the ‘value’ of the reified commodity. Since such

commodified 'objects' are not on display or being exchanged for their functional value (which is relatively stable and subject to the somewhat predictable forces of demand and supply) but rather their abstract value (which is prone to differ and fluctuate considerably due to the absence of any concrete controlling force), they become highly vulnerable to competition and rejection.

Lukács sees reification as a phenomenon which impacts four dimensions of social relationships: among objects and people, among people, between the individual and himself; and between individuals and society as a whole (Stahl 731). Reification leads to the objective and subjective predominance of the commodity form, a situation in which everyone and everything is treated with impunity and without distinction in a thing-like way. Individuals are encouraged to create their own brand; package or present themselves in a visually and economically attractive manner; and sell themselves to others such that they can acquire social value or popularity as quantified by their following on social media. At the same time, by losing sight of the qualitative dimensions of the social self and relationships, individuals become increasingly isolated in the real world and their real selves. Vogel et al. conclude in their statistical study that people reveal themselves selectively and construct their identities or characteristics in a preferred or reflective manner on social media (206). Individuals also develop increasingly addictive tendencies to compare themselves with others' perceived appearances, abilities, popularity, and social status as projected on digital media platforms (Feinstein et al. 161). This puts these individuals at a high risk for developing psychological, physiological, financial and of course, social issues; as documented by the plethora of research literature on the negative impacts of spending excessive amounts of time online, especially on social media applications.

Street, as early as 2003, postulated that seeing other people's and even one's own idealised digital presentation causes people to mentally compare themselves with others and even their own digital selves, thus affecting them in complex ways, especially emotionally. Such individuals also become highly vulnerable to changes in the value of

the abstractions they attempt to embody, and at risk of either becoming fragmented in their subjectivity or losing their subjectivity altogether. It may be deduced that the line between the self and the reified self becomes increasingly broken and blurred as the individual becomes both the manufacturer and consumer of imaginatively reified subjectivity that he attempts to sell in an attempt to validate the self in a society that increasingly raises, or rather changes, the bar for self-presentation and self-representation.

Lukács believed that the rise of the dominance of the commodity form in the economic sphere has led to a concurrent de-valuing of subjective consciousness, identity, emotion and thought. This might be interpreted as a rise of the domination of what society believes to be ‘masculine’ qualities to the detriment of ‘feminine’ qualities. Lukács propounded that a break with the organic unity and totality of human existence is a necessary precondition for economic development. Therefore, it is inevitable that the commodity form has, over time, subjected all aspects of society to its rule (Lukács 98).

Postmodern World and Digital Mass Media

In the postmodern world, digital mass media tools such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), TikTok, YouTube etc. are being used by individuals as ways of expressing themselves and representing themselves to the world. This can lead, and one may conjecture, has already begun to trigger to a virtual tsunami of reification by which digital media objects (such as digital mass media accounts, posts, photographs, videos, and so forth) are being treated as subjects in themselves (for instance, online artificial intelligence generated avatars are often believed to be real by the consumers and sometimes the producers themselves) or proof of the existence and value of subjects (people who erase his/her digital presence choose to obliterate the visible self, while enhancing digital presence leads to enhanced visibility and social value). Proof of this may be found in research conducted by writers such as Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick who note that “visual content creates higher impression formation by escalating social presence” and that “visuals are also easier to recall” (54). Objectification of the self has therefore become the need of the hour for justifying and

even proving the reality and value of the subjects for subjects without digital media representation as being treated as non-subjects, non-objects and in fact, non-entities. This phenomenon has a propensity to spill over from the individual unit into society as a whole due to the highly communicative nature of digitisation. Habermas mentions in his theory of communicative action, communication/ language forms the foundation of rationality, society and modernity. It is thus not perhaps a far stretch to say, this kind of reified communication has the potential to put humankind as a whole at risk.

Reification leads to a breakdown of the holistic intrinsic nature of human experience, leading to attitudes of contemplation or viewership where one passively adopts an objectifying gaze towards one's own mental state and capacity and invites others to do the same. Rather than struggling for the assertion of one's subjectivity, as in the twentieth century, the twenty-first century subject endeavours to fragment and erase his subjectivity, increasingly viewed by himself as weaknesses, imperfections and rough edges. He compares his subjectivity unfavourably with the carefully curated and processed objective representations of subjectivity by other individuals and attempts to imitate the same by commodifying himself and inviting himself and others to view him not as he is but rather, as he ought to be and presents himself to be through his social media handles. He may also choose to commodify himself in different ways on different social media platforms or on multiple accounts on the same social media platform in an attempt to garner as much social approval as possible. This digital and social commodification and schizophrenic presentation of multiple personalities may lead to a dissolution, partial or complete, of subjectivity and sanity. Rightly has Jameson argued that postmodernism is characterised by the consumption of sheer commodification as a process. Managing a large network of social media accounts and friends; feeling jealous of others; fearing missing out on online activities; and stress resulting from multiple social media personas and interactions; can lead to social anxiety levels ranging from low to very high, which in turn can cause a variety of social and psychological disturbances.

Analysis and Key Findings

As a part of postmodern society, which is, according to Guy Debord “the society of the spectacle,” anyone and everyone with a digital identity is propagating self-created myths replete with if not falsified then at the very least, selectively exaggerated self-identities in accordance with the hyperbolic digital human community (1). An unfortunately rampant by-product of this new culture is the rise of fraud through fake accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X) etc. by which individuals attempt to scam people by making them believe that they are who they pretend to be. But even more disturbing is how people seem to be fast losing awareness that they are scamming not only others but also themselves by losing connection with who they really are as a result of their strong identification with their online selves. Debord talks about this when he mentions the retrogression of social life as “the decline of being into having, and the decline of having into merely appearing” (Debord 17).

Psychologically, the distance between the real and digital self is growing with the real becoming more and more unpalatable as the digital becomes more and more fanciful as opposed to representational. It is not uncommon for the average person to lament how wonderful it would be if they could walk around with a filter on their face in real life and attempt to romanticise their existence by posting heavily edited photographs with quotes or ChatGPT-selected words, often in addition to snippets of AI-recommended music, to create an aesthetically and intellectually palatable version of self and virtual reality. In juxtaposition with the nature of offline setting, digital information is by default “more salient and visible” (Appel et al. 44), thereby creating ‘hyperreal’ digital universes and identities. This inevitably leads to increased cognitive dissonance within the individual who begins to emotionally identify the mythologised digital self and drift further and further away from the real self. This phenomenon had made a community-level appearance in Japan through the rise of a class of people termed the ‘Hikikomori’ or ‘shut-ins’ starting as early as the

1980s. These individuals who choose to distance themselves from society, friends, family and regular workplaces/ educational institutions etc. in favor of remaining confined to their rooms playing video games, watching anime and socialising via only digital media, represent the power digital lives have to make the individual acquire a distaste for the pressures of conventional, offline living. Their treatment of their online identities as their subjective existence and relegation of their offline bodies to the realm of non-consequential objects is a clear case of reification. Their sense of alienation from offline society due to its many pressures and limited opportunities for self-expression, self-realisation and self-actualisation makes these individuals develop a form of commodity fetishism for their online fictional selves. If the online self is appreciated, they feel as if the qualities they represent in/ perceive in their online self gets automatically transferred to their actual selves. This is why the postmodern, and daresay, post-Coronavirus society's individuals' sense of daily self-esteem tends to hinge on the number of likes, comments and shares received on their social media posts. They reciprocate the attention they get by in turn, bestowing likes, comments and shares on social media posts of others. This is what Debord identifies as an inverted society which is made up of relations between commodities as opposed to relations between subjects/ real people. It is a situation in which "passive identification with the spectacle supplants genuine activity" (Debord 4).

'I am seen (online) therefore I am', seems to be the new collective, unspoken dictum. To this are added the notions of hyper-humanity as arising from hyper-textuality. The postmodern individual sees himself as not a contained unit but rather a hypertextual self, consciousness with links to its digital representations embedded within it as a vital and inextricable part of the self. Relationships are hypertextual too. Those who know individuals in real life are almost invariably linked to their digital lives. The web of human relationships is now a world wide web of human relationships. The hash tagging and linking of the self is not a mere act of narcissism. It is necessary for visibility in the

postmodern world. It is visibility that ensures survival in the postmodern marketplace. Direct living has become “mere representation,” laments Debord and the digital self is now seen as not only a representation of the non-digital self, but rather as an indispensable medium, as vital as the flesh-body itself, through which the non-digital self exists in and interacts with the world (1).

Humankind has thus entered a place and time of neo self-idolisation in which individuals are becoming increasingly alienated from the tangible world around them and escaping into the reified digital world that allows them to create reified versions of their own selves and others for psychological and sociological satisfaction. In response to the plethora of avatars online, new digital communities are mushrooming in various parts of the world wide web to create virtual doll-houses and environments for digital individuals to live in.

The digital world, a combination of the world wide web and digital devices, have reduced the analogue world of subjects to a place lacking in animation, refinement and satisfaction. Whatever little remained of value of the objectified real world has been significantly de-valued by the Coronavirus outbreak of 2020 which forced hitherto analogue activities to shift from offline to online modes of existence. In a world where the survival of the fittest remains a reality, the shifting of the self to online platforms is a need of evolution and an assertion of the unreal over the real.

The presentation of the self in the form of digital information has an undeniably high utilitarian value by allowing for the relatively stable, long-lasting and far-reaching preservation and expression of human consciousness. Thinkers such as Schiller have bestowed high praise on creative expression or play drive by indicating that humans are only fully human when they play. Schiller also postulates that play uses art and beauty to achieve a unity of emotion and reason that ultimately leads to the cultivation of a beautiful mind and soul. Needless to say, without a shadow of doubt, almost all online platforms are not only a vital source of commerce and commodity; combined with manipulation and

make-believe; but also, of self-expression and play. However, the problem is that instead of leading to the hypothesised unity of emotion and reason, the play is becoming an end, a subject, an entity and the destination in itself, in stark contrast to the world of space-time reality that our bodies are bound to exist in.

Korean dramas like *Celebrity* (2023) and *Mask Girl* (2023) clearly depict the negative effects of reification in modern digital culture. Both shows look at how social media and online visibility turn people into consumables whose value is based on popularity, public attention, and digital interaction. A future where personality itself becomes a commodity is revealed in *Celebrity* (2023) through the protagonist, Seo Ah-ri's ascent inside the influencer economy. People are rewarded for their capacity to draw followers, provide material, and preserve a well-curated online persona rather than for their inherent talents. The show reveals how digital representations frequently take precedence over the actual people who created them, resulting in fierce rivalry, dishonesty, anxiety, and moral compromise. Metrics like this are increasingly used to mediate human connections. Similarly, *Mask Girl* (2023) also examines the social and psychological effects of a culture that is fixated on looks and online approval. The protagonist, Kim Mo-mi' experiences demonstrate how people are reduced to visual objects assessed by an anonymous public due to beauty standards and online attention. Alienation, insecurity, and violence follow as the line between the real self and the performed digital persona progressively blurs. The play illustrates how people internalise society's objectifying gaze and start to see themselves exclusively as objects to be devoured. Both these Korean dramas criticise the reified character of digital society, where visibility is equated with existence and self-worth. They expose the darker aspects of existence in a hyper-mediated digital age by showing how the quest for online recognition may undermine subjectivity, commodify identity, and have significant emotional and societal repercussions.

Our culture is becoming so increasingly reified that the digital representations/ artificial intelligence generated images and videos

are being mistaken for by people as the subject and by the subject as the self. For instance, a well-crafted Instagram page with carefully curated, edited and captioned photographs is commonly taken for the representation of the self by others as well as the subject's own self. The situation has become such that the subject is no longer content with experiencing real life as it happens. Real life must be aesthetically photographed, captioned, uploaded and duly liked by the subject's followers in order for the subject to truly enjoy life and express individuality. The reified subject is so caught up in this process that an ill-received or ignored Instagram photo or Facebook post may cause the individual to feel like a failure and spiral into depression, or surge out into the real world again with the hopes of making it big with the next digital post.

Conclusion: The Way Forward

It may be argued by critics such as Brecht and Aronowitz who view the distinction between subject and object is a fallacious one, arising from Kantian dualism which sees the natural world unnaturally divided into two neat, water-tight categories of subject and object. This, while always a source of criticism and question, has become even more complicated with the rise of artificial intelligence and digital representations of subjectivity via objectification of the self.

As explicated by Hendrick, this problem arises only because modern thought takes the contemplative subject of reified self-world relations as its paradigm, ignoring the alternative of an active subject that is engaged in content production. Fichte's proposal to postulate an identical subject-object (that is, a subject that produces objectivity by positing objective reality as distinct from itself) is what the digital world represented in its early stages. What it represents now, by having blurred the lines between subject and object to the point of non-distinction, remains a conundrum.

An answer may be found in the idealist conception of art, in this case, digital representation of the self, as an activity for the creation of a meaningful totality and in Schiller's view, as a form

of play by understanding it as such and stripping it clean of any additional signification.

What remains even more important than the theoretical resolution, is the realisation of the phenomenon of reification by the subjects themselves. As Lukács writes, “The act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object” (Lukács 178). The individual can understand and overcome reification through a practical engagement with totality. This kind of practical engagement may be seen in the attempt of Instagram influencers who present their bodies without any form of digital filters or strategic modification to fit current ideals of social approval; replete with their honest-to-reality messages and positive hashtags as documented by researchers such as Cwynar-Horta (51). Critics of Lukács such as Adorno and Bewes point out that this stance seems to commit Lukács to the position that a complete overcoming of reification is possible, thereby resulting in the creation of a healthy and transparent individual and society. However, this understanding ignores Lukács’ insistence that the resistance against reification must be understood as a never-ending struggle (Feenberg 199, 206). The “unconditional absorption of the total personality in the praxis of the movement”, Lukács writes, is “the only possible way of bringing about an authentic freedom” (320). While the modern world viewed fantasy as a necessary and pleasurable escape from banal reality, the need of the hour of the postmodern world is to escape from the pleasure-web of the fantasy world by recognising it as such and relegating it to the realm of personal imagination rather than endeavouring to concretise, represent and sell these fragmented and fluctuating notions to the world via digital mass-media.

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