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Selfies as Secular Religion

Transcending the Self

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Abstract

This article argues that contemporary selfie-practice sometimes display patterns that have otherwise been associated with religion. Selfies manifesting ideals, or with a more crude description bragging-selfies, can be shown to deliver transcendence to users of social media. These representations transcend the object, the corporeal and temporal, and for those entering wholly into their frame of reference, also the self. In a situation of competition for likes, selfie-takers end up providing the gaze of the other themselves, resulting in a self-creating subject. These selfies can be understood as ideal icons, which the selfie-practitioner is the first to desire and consume.

Keywords: selfie, religion, secular, consumption, deification.

Introduction

Social Media is a pervasive part of contemporary social life. At the end of 2018 Facebook, had 2.272 billion active monthly users, and Instagram 1 billion (Statista 2019a, 2019b). Such platforms can be seen as new technologies for constructing “subjectivity” and “selfhood.”¹ Not a little of the activity on these platforms is devoted to selfies and cognate practices. These platforms are more than an amplifier of human agency; they give users an unprecedented

¹ Inspired by Foucault 1988. On technology changing the human, see Heidegger; Lyotard; pace McLuhan. The use of cultural media has changed the way we think (Kittler; Lyotard), and the digital has changed how the brain functions (Small et al.; Sparrow et al.).

power over their self-representation.² According to Sturken and Cartwright the modern notion of the self is visually constituted (94). New ways of looking implies new ways of construing the self (99-101). Technology involves choices that actualize a particular teleology (Marcuse). However, although these technologies might be new, their way of representing selfhood is not unrelated to earlier construals of the self. In fact, many of the contemporary images of selfhood that get reconstituted in this new practice have earlier been associated with religion. In the following I argue that one common form of selfie-practice can be understood as an expression of secular religiosity.

In *How to See the World*, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that “there is a new us” on the internet (21). The self-portrait, once the prerogative of those who could afford to pay an artist to spend weeks or months on the task, became more readily available with the camera. “The heroic artist took some of the aura of the king (or queen) and transferred it to him- or herself” (40). With the smartphone the production and dissemination of self-portraits became a common commodity. This in turn gives the self-portrait almost an indefinite number of new contexts and different uses. The situation is fragmented, and the postmodern portrait is a performance that frames the self as an act more than an essence (50). Mirzoeff emphasizes the communicative aspect of selfie-practice. “Each selfie is a performance of a person as they hope to be seen by others” (62). It is this hope I will reflect upon, the hope of an ideal, and the hope to see oneself fulfilling it. In this article, I argue then that the first and lasting act of sharing in which the selfie-practitioner engages is directed towards the self; it is a dialogue with the self, in which hopes and fulfilment are provided by the very same agent.

Elsa Godart’s *Je Selfie Donc Je Suis* is close to my own concern. She argues that selfies and the new cultures that they are a part of constitute a new way of construing selfhood – humanity 2.0 (175). Although notions of selfhood have always been changing, what distinguishes our present time is the rate of change and the varied inputs. More than earlier, today’s self is a mosaic (97). The existential subject “thrown into the world” is changed for a connected being (173, alluding to the notion of “geworfenheit”). Godart sees this as a transcendence of hyper-individualism (174). It is no longer the eye but the camera which defines what is real (165). The hyper-individual overcomes itself by constituting itself, not on a general basis of humanity, but in its own representations. The post-hyper-individual has overcome individuality partly through getting rid of the “other.” This argument has a natural conclusion in Godart’s question of whether the virtual icon of the selfie does not constitute a new idol (168). She does not pursue this thought further, or answer her own question. What I will do in this article is suggest some ways in which the present selfie-culture can indeed be seen as a secular form of deification (an apotheosis).

² A Georgia Tech study of 2.5 million selfies indicate that they were used to project identity signals in the areas of: appearance (51.75%), social relations (14.38%), ethnicity (12.78%), travel (7.16%), and health and fitness (5.23%) (Deeb-Swihart et al.: 7). A recent meta-study suggests that Facebook fulfils: a) “the need to belong,” and b) “the need for self-presentation” (Nadkarni and Hofman).

Theory and Method

What Kind of Self-Portraits?

The selfie-genre is normally defined as an image taken by the photographer portraying one's own face, but also other parts of the body. For the sake of the argument of this article I extend this to images taken with automatic equipment which can increase the distance (such as selfiesticks or drones), or even with the occasional instrumental aid of an (anonymous) photographer, the point at issue being that images are represented as being a view of the self upon the self. Selfies display a part of the body in some chosen situation, most often the face. Selfies overlap with aspects of gonzo journalism which highlights the subjectivity of the reporter, and at times uses imagery and camera-angles which are intended as representations of what the journalist or artist sees from their own eyes (Winston). The category of selfies discussed in this article can be described as selfies manifesting ideals attained or simply "bragging selfies," and that category only. I proceed with a functional description of bragging, not entering into discussions over its moral status. What people brag about displays what they value, and this varies from one context to the next. Yet there is something common to all of them – the possession of some value and a situation of comparison. Some studies indicate that there seems to be a tendency, at least in the west, to consistently construe the self as better than the average (Alicke et al.). This is no simple equation as what generates social value in one context is not the same in the next (Tiiidenberg: 7). While the bikini-shot is required in one context, it is ridiculed with a sarcastic selfie in another. Prime among the bragging selfies are the "rich and famous" category with millions of likes. Although these are extreme cases, they can be taken as representative in so far as the general bragging selfie emulates them, the difference being in the leverage at the disposal of the selfie-taker, whether that is financial, social, moral, erotic, or some other capital. Even asceticism can be a form of capital, given the right context, for instance an environmentalist or religious one. This in turn entails that bragging should probably be thought of as a scale rather than an epithet, and that most people engage in it to some extent. This also makes the charge of narcissism somewhat moot.³ Using the diagnostic term "narcissism" often hinders more than advances discussions, in so far as it removes the practice from the everyday experience of an overwhelming amount of people.⁴ However, what the persistent discussion of narcissism does indicate is that bragging in one form or another is often associated with selfies. Bragging selfies are powerful as self-disclosure, and self-promotion is intrinsically rewarding (Tamir and Mitchell). They also avoid the tendency not to brag in relation to concrete persons as the media platforms remove the direct interaction with the other (Lynch et al.).

³ For studies that indicate a correlation between high scores on narcissism traits and avid social media use, see Mehdizadeh; Ryan and Xenos; Marshall et al.; Sorokowski et al.; Liu and Baumeister. Whether it *leads* to narcissism is different question; see Gonzales and Hancock.

⁴ What appears clear is that those with already diagnosed psychological challenges do in fact engage in selfie practices which others find excessive. On internet and psychological functioning, see Andreassen; Sampasa-Kanyinga and Lewis; Arampatzi et al.; Tromholt; Cramer et al.; Verduyn.

Religion and the Secular

My argument builds on the presumption that cultural structures always change, yet hardly ever vanish completely. Most often they go through processes of change that leave the origin of their components occluded. Religious structures continually change to provide forms and symbols with which new generations create meaning. To take some Western examples of such code-switching, the Patristic discussions of the Trinity is a substructure in many Western discussions of personhood, and the present political system depends in part on theological notions of natural theology, and notions of power and glory from the scholastic period (see, for instance, Gillespie; Gregory; Agamben). Increasingly, philosophers of religion and social scientists are reconsidering the hypothesis of secularization which in its banal form posited a change from superstitious religion to scientific rationalism through enlightenment and modernity (as did, for instance, Russel). Some are arguing that there is an ongoing process of re-enchantment of culture which they call post-secular (Gorski). I rather side with those that maintain that modernity and its present manifestations have never been “secular” in an absolute sense (Latour; Milbank). This goes just as much for the cultural systems which sustain contemporary social media as any other aspect of modern life.

“Religion” is a term commonly used to describe how humans relate to ultimate reality. This is especially the case when the question of what religion *should* or *should not* be emerges. Here I will not delve into this issue. The term “religion” is used in academic discourses to describe particular activities humans engage in, most often having to do with ultimate concerns and the creation of meaning and community. For the sake of this argument I adopt Geertz description of religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz: 4). The notion that I pursue is the “clothing of the conceptions in an aura of factuality,” that is construing them as somehow transcendent. By transcendent I do not imply supernatural, but the construction of fiduciary frames beyond the empirical which are able to carry the weight of creating meaning (Klas: 38). Moreover, it designates a level that connects the person to the rest of reality or the cosmos, not seldom in an affective way. Whether an activity not normally described as a religion can be thought to function within what appears to be religious structures is a matter of definition. For instance, sports or devotion to rock-stars have been described as religious, religion-like, or the more value laden quasi-religious, para-religious, or even pseudo-religious (Ward). In this article I will describe how selfie practices bear a family resemblance to devotional activities normally associated with religion (see Smart: 47; Jefner: 50; Aldridge: 31). This also entails that the religion-like symbolism and imagery is part of what gives them their potency. The aspects I describe in this article are not dogmatic definitions or confessions of faith. Rather they are like the loose vernacular religious practices found outside the reach of religious professionals in most religions. In short, religion is here understood as a way to speak of how transcendence is created through practices.

Religion and Consumption

The bragging selfie finds its natural place in a setting where consumption takes on meaning-creating functions. I do not suggest that consumption is negative or should be

criticized in itself – it is necessary to all human life. I rather propose a reflection on the particular role of consumption in some parts of contemporary digital culture. Most religions propose solutions to problems of their own making. One should overcome illusion (*maya*) to achieve nirvana, deal with sin to attain salvation, get rid of ignorance to live in eudaimonia, etc. The solution to human fears and desires proposed by contemporary advertisement driven culture is the act of consumption.⁵ Consumption takes on importance beyond the meeting of immediate needs. It provides identity as a primary mode of self-construal (Veblen; Bordieu). For many, consumption is a way to “true happiness (McFarland Taylor). Consumption is the affective motor of capitalist society, not production (Baudrillard 1991). Max Weber argued that capitalism was a natural outcome of a Protestant bent on hard work, frugality, and individual responsibility (1963, 2001).⁶ However, from the very beginning surplus capital was used for consumption (Schama). Even more so as emotions take a more important role in the western cultural movement of Romanticism (C. Campbell), a notion which agrees with Heelas and Woodheads description of a subjective turn in contemporary religion (2). New experiences, and therefore the consumption of new things, came to take a central place in western culture. For many modern consumers the consumption of new things and experiences comes to take the meaning-creating function earlier played by religion (Ritzer) and can be described as a secular ritual (Twitchell).

Method

In the following main discussion, I will argue for three ways in which the bragging selfie can be thought of as a practice of transcendence, and hence as religious. While the argument draws on primary research, my own contribution is a theoretical reflection drawing mainly on continental philosophers. The argument will be divided into three parts with increasing levels of abstraction. The point is not to find out empirically whether selfie-practitioners think of their activities as religious. In most instances they will probably reject the thought (as do fans when confronted with the notion of “celebrity worship;” see Doss). Rather the argument is that it makes sense analytically, given the parameters defined above, to describe the bragging selfie as a form of religiosity or spirituality.

Selfie-Practice and Transcendence

The Selfie Transcends the Object

The object is transcended in several ways in the practice of taking selfies. The first and most basic sense is banal but merits attention: a selfie is a representation or a symbol. A basic semiotic insight is the observation that symbols are not the things they represent, be it words, signs, or an image such as a selfie (Chandler: 11-37). It is not necessary to accept the theoretical system of structuralism to use this observation. The link between the sign and the referent, if present, is indirect. Saussurean and Piercian semiotics disagree on the degree to which the two

⁵ Walter Benjamins famous quip is suggestive in all its apocalyptic fervor: “Capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion. . . . capitalism is a pure religious cult, perhaps the most extreme there ever was” (259).

⁶ For a recent discussion of the relation between capitalism and religion, see Goodchilds. Many contemporary economists recognize the theological nature of their own discourse, such as the “invisible hand” of the market (see J. Y. Campbell et al.: 4).

are separated, with the former school seeing a more absolute division between them. The simple point to bring forward is the disconnect between the selfie and whatever person and situation it represents. The object becomes secondary to the *representamen* (the sign) and *interpretamen* (the resulting meaning) in Peircean terms.⁷ It becomes a sign in a context of other signs, and it is this particular situation of disentanglement I discuss in the rest of the article. The “viral post” is an extreme illustration of the possible disjunction between the visual representation of a simple scene and its new life in new contexts (see Nahon and Hemsley). There is some of this disjunction in all forms of photography. As far as the bragging-selfie is concerned it is foundational. As I will argue in the following the representation becomes more important than the original context.

A foundational theory of the Frankfurt School (critical thought) provides another way of conceptualizing the way objects are represented in a way that transcends their physical nature. In this theoretic framework an object accrues fetishistic value when the exchange value is greater than its use value. To explain this notion a slight detour by the notions of alienation and commodification is required. In Marxist theory alienation is thought to occur when workers no longer have control over production, on account of which they lose agency in their relationships (on alienation, see Henning; Jaeggi). The value of their production comes to be defined by social relations, over which they have no control. Those who control the system of social relations and the values they construct have access to objects of fetishist value. Possession of such fetishes serves as a form of protection and social status, beyond any use value (*Warenfetischismus*). This makes the system comparable to a religion since “things are endowed with a life of their own” (Marx: 65). The object has value in a social system, not on account of its use value, but on account of its leverage within that system. This not only goes for things but also social relations which are commodified in so far as they are constituted by the imagined relationships between sold and bought objects. In this exchange subjects and objects swap place, with the former becoming passive and secondary (Lukács: 93). The fetish comes to take the place of the agent. To Adorno and Horkheimer this dynamic is especially present in the modern state which subjects all of human culture to the laws governing the capitalist market. To them, mass production of culture by necessity entails commodification, fetishization, and passivity.

The bragging selfie can be thought to transcend objects when the representation becomes more important than that which they represent. The bragging selfie displays the possession of some desired entity or experience, portraying the person in a situation of consuming or embodying it. This is accomplished through the inclusion of objects in selfie image, or through captions explaining the situation. Some are simple like the selfie with a vacation view in the background (outstretched feet on a beach, or a smiling face on a Himalayan hike, etc.), or a new motorbike, a piece of Kobe meat, etc. Or they can be social, including a selfie with a beautiful partner, or children, or a person with public status like a sports star, a politician, etc. The representation accrues value as a proof of possessing something others do not have to the same extent. It is in this sense that things become fetishes in the selfie situation. They are included as symbols bestowing value on the selfie-taker within a particular digital social

⁷ Moreover, they are symbolical, iconic, and indexical at the same time, all with reference to the different levels of sign interaction.

community. They are objects which accrue value beyond their immediate use value, or one could say that their use value is transplanted into a new setting. They are now valuable in so far as they relate directly to the project of representing the self.

The process of objectivization also applies to the selfie itself. On social media platforms the image becomes an object that can be traded. It is not payed for in other selfies, but in likes. The likes are akin to attention and a form of recognition, not unlike the patron system of ancient Greece and Rome. Those with the highest number of likes achieves the highest form of status. The self and its supporting objects are themselves objectivized. Bragging is an attempt at outdoing others, and the system of likes on social media provides for that. With the currency of likes, the social media that use them resemble a form of market (on like-seeking behavior, see Dumas et al.). A successful posting is one that generates views and is also being shared further by others. The continued documentation facilitated by various social media enables the comparison necessary for such an activity. The objects no longer relate primarily to each other but to a new form of communication and social interaction. They are symbols of status, intended for a trade with other such symbols. The bragging selfies work like advertisements, drawing on existent desires, and at the same time create new desires (on advertisement, see Crisp). In the context of social-media it is the representation of possession that has value. The use value of an object is twice transcended, first in the social situation it is used, and secondly in the digital situation in which it is represented.

Clearly the present situation is not wholly new; all human cultures display their own status symbols, and ways of transcending the object (totems, cowry shells, money, cars, etc.). Portraits have often had this role. As already noted, the portraits of dignitaries of past times were a *consumatio* of their status, the symbol of their glory. In contrast, the selfie is successful and brings status in the act of being consumed. The former displayed an imagined essence, the latter operates with an ideal that is consumed and therefore unstable, it does not survive its use. This is the case since status based on the possession of a fetish decreases with the number of possessors. A fetish is only powerful in being unique. Like linguistic clichés, the bragging-selfies were initially powerful but soon become trite. In this they follow the life-span of other fashion statements; the instant they break through they are already spent and discarded. Like any good advertisement, the successful social media posting creates desires that cannot in the end be met.⁸ In this sense it can be seen as a perfect product of mass culture, perpetually trying to outdo others in a struggle for the unique. Selfie-representations of bodily ideals are typical examples of this (thigh-gaps, duck face selfie, six pack, v-cut, etc.). The fetish seems immensely powerful when desired, but later fails to provide that which was sought.⁹

Selfies do not only transcend objects to bestow status, but also to construct identity (on consumption and identity, see Bordieu; Elliot). The use of particular objects to represent

⁸ Chamath Palihapitiya, the former vice-president for user growth at Facebook, claims: “The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works” (Wong). Sean Parker, former executive of Facebook, worked to “consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible” (Solon).

⁹ Tromholt’s study links social competition and subjective unhappiness. Veruyn qualifies that passive use undermines subjective well-being, but active use can contribute to social capital and can therefore lead to a rise in subjective well-being.

connection to a group or culture is not new. However, that representations of consumption take such a large role in the construal of identity is not as common. Sure, it can be found in mediaeval kings displaying might by consuming copious amounts of rare meats, or feelings related to particular regional food items. Still, making representations of the process of consumption a major part of the identity is something new. Consumers of commercials desire to consume the object on display, but more than anything to be the person represented. The purpose of the bragging selfie is to be such an object of desire, to be a person which receives desiring gazes. In such a situation where objects become fetishes, consuming them takes on a religious connotation. Consumption becomes spirituality and provides therapy (Arnold and Reynolds). Consumption is the way to emancipation, and more consumptions bring more happiness. Consumption bestows value on the consumer, as suggested by the classic 1971 L'Oreal advertisement, "because I'm worth it." With an increase in consumption comes an increase in value, and consumption constitutes the identity of the person. Different forms of consumption mirrors different identities. To conclude, selfies transcend the object in being symbols, fetishes, marks of status, and marks of identity. In fulfilling these functions, they are witness to a system of interaction beyond that of objects. They become a kind of hyper-object, a notion which leads on to the following discussion.

The Selfie Transcends the Corporeal

Selfies do not only transcend objects in a setting of consumption, they can also be thought to transcend the corporeal. In traditional religions human life is most often described as being directed towards a goal. This goal can be more or less attained in this present world, some are saints others sinners, some attain *moksha* ("enlightenment") others remain deluded. The bragging selfie can be thought to function in the same manner as hagiographic representations in other religions. It is an iconography which portrays those who have attained some form of ideal. Religion has often functioned as a way to represent and reflect upon that which is deemed uniquely human. Feuerbach's early work, *The Essence of Christianity*, contains the well-known description of "theology as anthropology"; to him the image of God is a projection of the human essence. He argues that humans thereby make themselves divine. Later, Feuerbach qualifies this image somewhat in adding reflections on the deep-seated needs manifest in such constructions. The embodied contingency of human life leads to a quest for a transcendence of the human. It is my argument in this section that the bragging selfie is such an attempt to transcend corporeality and temporality.

Social media can be thought to constitute a closed world that mostly functions self-referentially. The connection to real corporal life is maintained to varying extents, but this connection becomes secondary. First, as communication is increasingly moved to these media, they refer more and more to information within the scope of their orbit. All the more so as the information available to individual users is governed by algorithms that are set towards enhancing consumption based on previous interest (see Pariser). This provides for personal marketing, but also directs which friends and what kind of information is shown in the streams of users. This is especially the case as images more and more take the place of words. In a recent meta-study on social media, researchers came to the conclusion that Facebook users "show rather than tell" and emphasize group and "consumer identity" instead of a "personally narrated" one (Zhao et al.). Second, in many instances the digital representations of social

relationships become more important than physical relationships. For instance, intimate relationships are increasingly thought of as existing in so far as they are displayed on social media (Papp et al.). Third, the way attention is increasingly directed towards the digital sphere implies its importance vis-à-vis the physical. For instance, accidents on account of smart-phone use are a commonplace (Kim et al.). They indicate that for a good number of people it appeared more important to check the internet than drive a car in traffic, or walk safely through dangerous surroundings. The increase in selfie-related deaths are another indication. Fourth, and most important, is the way in which social media construct an ideal reality not directly limited by corporeality. It is to this last issue the rest of the section will be devoted.

French thinkers Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard developed concepts that can provide an aid in the description of how the bragging selfie transcends the corporeal (see also Marturano and Bellucci). Debord's arguments are colored by the revolutionary one-sidedness of his day but the arguments nevertheless can helpfully further reflection on contemporary challenges. To Debord, modern society is marked by the indirect mediation of images, in a society of the Spectacle. Where human interaction had often been face-to-face, images increasingly stand in for agents. "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (Thesis 1). The capitalist rule of maximizing profits results in a mass-culture of passive onlookers. It provides universal single products to meet the needs of as many as possible. Here is "the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life" (Thesis 42). The representations available are uniform to the degree of fixing reality in an eternal present. In a similar manner, Baudrillard (1991) argues that in contemporary society reality has been replaced by the simulation provided by symbols and signs. This world of simulacra is always realized and is without defects (1995: 8). This does not entail a disappearance of the real, rather the illusion becomes a new real world, an imaginary without origin (1991: 1).

"The imaginary" aids in conceptualizing the notion of a sphere where every ideal is realized. That images and constructed characters are expressions of ideals has long been recognized in aesthetics and media studies (Sturken and Cartwright: 120). In this sense the selfie manifests an ideal, one could say an icon. The relation between this icon and perceptions of selfhood is complex and individual, but still displays common traits. Ideal photographic images, whether in advertisements, or their personal expression in the bragging-selfie, construct a mass of similar bodies manifesting an ideal (like Foucault's "docile bodies of the modern state"; Sturken and Cartwright: 111). In this sense the images on social media approach the function of the idealized Greek statues, especially in the classical period. The sculpture represents the ideal form, and individuation recedes, as was the case in much Greek thought (Reid). In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes describes the deification of Greta Garbo: "The name given her, the divine, probably aimed to convey less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from a heaven where things are formed and perfected in the clearest light" (57). It is not the person or the experience as such which matters, but the form they point to. This form provides the ever-changing world a return to unity. A notion that in turn entails that the temporal and physical recede, with the ideal taking precedence. In other words, an ideal human form, without history, and without the offences of the body.

The world of the imaginary is given a personal form in the social media presence of celebrities. I am thinking here of celebrity *per se*, people who are famous for being famous (see Boorstin). These cases display the power of a well-crafted representation. It is not their corporal real life that is marketed, but images of success. These do not even have to be real persons as the popular profiles of digitally constructed super models and singers reveal (Instagram 2019a, 2019b). These are instances of idealized personal lives, representations, with which users of social media interact. The most famous ones count followers in hundreds of millions and take out millions of dollars in revenue (in 2018, Kylie Jenner was making about 1 million dollar per Instagram post (Gorsler; Blake et al.). Her sister Kim Kardashian helped establish the selfie as a central component of self-branding (Nicol). In the bragging-selfie the identification with the ideals go beyond a vicarious participation in the glory of the celebrity, which was the case in the TV-age (Rose and Wood). In the common consumption of celebrity-culture it is not the celebrity that is at issue, but the way the celebrity becomes a mode of expressing the self. Being a follower of a celebrity is a way of expressing one's identity – the ideals to which one aspires and, in the end, exercises in one's own selfie-practice. Consuming the representations is having a share in them. "Post-God celebrity is now one of the mainstays of organizing recognition and belonging in secular society" (Rojek: 58). The glory earlier bestowed on rulers is spread more democratically to the extent of being available to all who engage in bragging selfies – they too share in an ideal beyond the body (on rulers and glory, see Agamben: 2). The icon or idol of various religions shared in a transcendent reality, and that is what the selfie does as well.

The net of meaning-bearing relations created by these connected iconographic representations becomes a new level of existence for those who invest themselves in it. That is, in so far as subjectivity is created within that very framework it is also confined to it. Drawing on Foucault (1977), it can be argued that "the concept of the panopticon is about how we participate in practices of self-regulation in response to systems of regulation" (Sturken and Cartwright: 107). Where there had earlier been a complicated relationship between experience and its representation, the glory of the ideal representation has the potential to relegate bodily experience to a forgotten sphere. The self-regulation takes the form of veiling that which is deemed shameful, everyday lived experience deviating from the ideal. In this sphere the fetish *is* reality, and it exists in being displayed. That is, the selfie transcends the object and the corporeal and creates a new reality, one in which it becomes something more than its every-day "use value." This level of reality exists on social media platforms, and to the extent that one accepts the ideals furthered it becomes a reality in which social relations are created. The adulation selfies receive, in number of likes, shows the basic religious element involved. The transcendent construction of idealized bragging selfies entails a "sacralization of the self" in contemporary culture (Ward). To conclude this section, the selfie is sacred exactly in *being set apart* from everyday life, it transcends the ordinary corporeal and temporal life (following the definition of religion proposed by Durkheim: 36-40).

The Selfie Transcends the Self

Sturken and Cartwright describes the modern understanding of the self with the concept of "the gaze" (94). They describe the gaze of the spectator as directed both outward from the spectator, but simultaneously from other objects and people into it. The practice of looking

involves both address and reception. However, as I will argue below, who is looking and offering themselves to be looked at is obscured when it comes to selfies. In photo theory, photographs are often understood as techniques used to “establish difference” (Sturken and Cartwright: 106). For instance, the distance between researcher and ethnological object is rehearsed with each image (Sturken and Cartwright: 111). This dynamic tension between sameness and otherness is what gives the selfie its power. In this the selfie shares certain characteristics of the orthodox icon. In many icons the lines of the image converge outside it on the onlooker in a reverse perspective (Kulvicki: 102-5). Moreover, the eyes are often painted in such a way that the onlooker feels observed from all angles in a room. This technique invites the onlooker into the world of the image and establishes a symbolic contact. This in turn issues a demand for response (Kress and van Leeuwen: 127-28). The selfie in similar fashion invites the onlooker into the personal world of the selfie-taker through a direct and often inviting gaze.

Selfies can be understood as an attempt to relate to a self that is perceived as fluid and unstable (on the fluid self, see Baumann). One way of conceptualizing this fluctuating relation is the psychoanalytical concept of “mirror” and “mirror stage.” The theory is that children come to construct a self-contained “I” through contrasts with other entities. Initially they realize that they do not have complete mastery over their selves, they do not move exactly as they wish, they cannot manipulate the world as they wish (Lacan 1966). The mirror represents an ideal image of the self, which the child wishes to unite with. The perceived tension between the seen ideal self and the real self results in a tension which the child eventually overcomes through identifying with the image. “Lacan posits that the mirror constructs the self, that the self as organized entity is actually an imitation of the cohesiveness of the mirror image” (Gallop: 38). This mirror experience can also be interpreted analogically as a description of social mirroring and perceptions of “being seen” which contribute to identity-formation (one could also call it “recognition”; Honneth).

The challenge with the bragging selfie is that in so far as social interaction is played out in a situation of explicit competition the experience of “being seen” is oftentimes hard to achieve. If the bragging selfie is taken as proof of outdoing others, it fetishizes an object, the self as ideal. The social mirroring experienced by the bragger is on the one hand positive when it results in likes, but also negative and agonistic when the other becomes an ideal against which one measures success. The immediate mirror-like quality of the selfie offers an easy way out of this problem. The selfie-practitioner can take control of “the gaze” by providing it from within. This gaze of the self upon its own representation, the selfie, is both chronologically and hierarchically prior to that of others in a network. The selfie-taker goes through the process of taking an image, checking results, retaking, cropping, filtering, and saving the ideal result. The stage from which the images are taken is ever-changing, a context in which perceived selves are irreducibly complex. The world of the imaginary, however, is potentially stable, but only in so far as the often-competitive nature of social media can be overcome. This is done when an ideal representation of one’s own making is constructed, and thereafter consumed by the very person constructing it. In the act of consumption, the selfie-taker unites with the ideal image, the imaginary. When this occurs the selfie-taker is first spectator, address and addressee, sender and receiver. One of the central notions of the philosopher Berkeley can be drawn upon here: reality exists in so far as it is observed (*Esse est percipi [aut percipere]*). The

self exists in so far as it is observed, and the observing gaze is what the selfie-taker provides. In this context it is apposite to say that “I exist in so far as I see myself.”¹⁰

The ideal self constructed in the bragging-selfie is a desired commodity. In this context desire can simply be defined as the longing to possess or be united with an object or to exist in a particular situation. In social media there is a desire to be the person portrayed in advertisements, a celebrity, in short to manifest ideals. The way the selfie achieves this end is through singlehandedly playing the different roles of revealer and receiver. The selfie, as a representation of wholeness, is actualized in the very act of consumption. However, the closed circle of selfie-taker gazing at the selfie gazing back retains the pleasure associated with desire but removes agency. The pleasure of agency, whether achieving or conquering something, is exchanged for scopophilia – the pleasure of looking. With immediate satisfaction temporality also recedes, and with it the human projection into the future. The selfie-practitioner then becomes a passive consumer. The selfie is consumed by the selfie-taker, but in this process the tables are turned. In so far as the imaginary constructed becomes the new reality, it is the selfie which consumes the selfie-taker. In becoming one’s self’s “other” the selfie works a libidinal self-containment.¹¹ The result is that the selfie taker exists in so far as it consumes; yet it exists in consuming itself. This in turn entails a technology of self-transcendence. To conclude, the bragging selfie practice results in a self-creating subject – an attribute traditionally associated with divinity.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that bragging-selfies can be understood as a secular religious activity, a spiritual practice (it bears repeating that I do not claim that all selfies function in this way). I argued this through a three-step argument with increasing levels of abstraction.

First, the selfie transcends the object in being a symbolical representation of lived reality. This is common for all forms of symbols. I further argued that the particular form of selfie discussed in this article, the bragging selfie, can be understood as a socially effective symbol. By this I mean that the objects displayed become something more than their immediate use value in a new social setting in the digital sphere. They become marks of status and identity. This goes for the image of the self as well, which is turned into a symbolical object in the process. It is no longer physical objects as such which interact, but representations. Second, selfies become hyper-objects, in the sense of existing beyond and independent of the world of the objects they display. They are part of a reality where representations interact with each other, a hyper-reality, an imaginary. Therefore, they transcend the corporeal and temporal. They represent ideals, forms, and become reality only to the extent that users identify with them. This identification is achieved in the practice of taking bragging selfies and sharing them on social media platforms. Third, the selfie creates a new way of constituting the self in that the selfie-taker singlehandedly serves as revealer and receiver of communication. The representation of the selfie image is captured, doctored, and made an ideal to be desired. The

¹⁰ A notion completely at odds with Levinas’ notion of the face of the other (*rapport de face à face*) which constitutes a call that brings the self into being (95, 119).

¹¹ The mirror stage “typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body image” (Lacan 1953: 14).

selfie-taker then proceeds to consume this image of the self, in an act of self-constitution. The result is an ideal transcendent consumer deriving meaning from the act of consuming.

This process of creating a self can be thought of as religious on several accounts. The most basic argument of this article is that it is religious in creating a level of transcendence beyond the physical. That which gives the selfie-life its meaning is not the physical as such. The physical rather serves as a stepping stone for moving in the direction of ideals. These ideals are religious in being fetishes, that is objects with a magical power in social relations. Moreover, the social relations implied are performed on a platform that is perceived by some users as more real than physical life. In so far as the selfie-practitioner identifies with the image and its setting in a net of similar images this ideal reality takes precedence over every day physical life. They exist in a reality set apart from every-day life, a common definition of the religious. They are non-corporeal and non-temporal realities. The concluding argument is that the whole process in the end results in a self-creating subject, which by many definitions is a marker of divinity. This digital subject exists in consuming itself, like an *Ouroboros* or burning bush. Any perceived tension between the ideal and physical life is overcome in the very practice of selfie-taking, which turns it into a spiritual practice. Once this is done the selfie is not only looked at but gazes eternally back at the selfie-taker.

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