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## STREAMS OF THE SELF: THE INSTAGRAM FEED AS NARRATIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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**Abstract:** This article offers a working draft of a larger qualitative analysis of the popular smartphone application Instagram. It offers a reading of the ubiquitous contemporary form of self-portraiture, the selfie, locating its origin in the longer evolution of digital photography into a form of social media. Though its function as a basic self-portrait and signifier for our various social profiles appears straightforward, it has somehow become the 'face' of online sociality and subjectivity, a portrait of the promise and peril of our online existence. And yet, a closer look at the various feeds and streams in which the selfie appears reveals that it is one genre amongst many, no more or less common than a variety of landscapes, still-lives, and other modes of photographic observation. Taken together, these various views of the world reveal an emplaced mode of image-driven autobiography, one far more complex and nuanced than a straightforward meme would appear to be.

"With smartphone in hand, we can now share with others how our narcissism looks to us. The selfie chronicles a counter-Copernican revolution...everything once again revolves around us." (Guengerich, 2014)

Of the myriad of cultural objects generated by the rise of ubiquitous digital media, few are perhaps more loathed than the selfie. The simple act of taking one's own picture and distributing it via social media to varying spheres of the public is apparently symptomatic of any number of social and individual ills. It has been deemed the paragon of social narcissism, an emblem so to speak of our wider social tendency to get lost in ourselves. It is also a symptom of mental illness and risk for sui-

cide, an overwhelming indication of a lack of a sense of self (Wollaston, 2013). Generationally, they seem to be the cultural mark of the so-called me-generation (or more accurately, the ME-ME-ME generation), the crop of digital native millenials who grew up overly supported by protective parents, coddled and with plenty of self-esteem (Perman, 2013). Even the act of taking the selfie, posing with one's arm stretched in front of oneself, has become an object of scorn. The comedian Jena

Kingsley ironically voiced this revulsion by creating a 'no-selfie-zone' in Central Park and handing out fake tickets to hapless violators as park ranger (Thomas, 2014).

On the one hand, the anger and condemnation generated by the selfie is perhaps understandable, if not entirely justified. As a sub-cultural trend that has reached the mainstream, selfies provide a convenient scapegoat for a conservative free-floating social scorn that identifies various signifiers as indications of a wider cultural decline. They are an easy answer to the perennial rhetorical question "You know what's wrong with the world today?" Their strong connection with mobile technology and social networking further implicates them in wider concerns about the fetishization of gadgets and the ill-effects of living through one's screen. The selfie is a poster child for the sort of insularity that Sherry Turkle describes in *Alone Together* (Turkle, 2012).

On the other hand, however, the connection between the selfie and the level of self-centeredness that a diagnosis of narcissism would imply is paradoxical. The impulse to share the selfie with the world is a gesture of broadcasting the self for the world to see, not a closing off of the self. Indeed, it invites a level of inter-action between participants, the audience and the subject, that we might classify as a form of interactive media. Moreover, isolating the selfie ignores the broader spectrum of images that we capture in and alongside of them, and indeed the narrative threads that emerge within and between images as they form a larger stream or feed. And finally, as image capture becomes a common cultural practice it alters the relationship between the self and the world, inviting one to view the world, if not photographically, then at least as it might be photographed. These interactions with the world and others seem to obviate the apparent self-centeredness and narcissism that at first glance motivates the gesture of staring at one's image in a screen and recording that image for the world to see. Far from

appearing frozen or captivated by one's appearance, I would like to offer instead that the selfie comprises one part of a dynamic, unfolding interactive narrative socially authored by the self and the wider world.

In his influential *Language of New Media*, a book perhaps more influential for stimulating debate than settling it, Lev Manovich stipulates that new media are *not*, among other things, interactive (2001, pp. 70–75). Calling it "The Myth of Interactivity," Manovich rejects the term on the grounds that it is both too general and too specific. In a general sense, all media are interactive in that the user is always an active participant in the meaning-making process. More specifically, he reserves the term interactive new media for those works which directly solicit user intervention in order to function. For him, these are but one type of a wider constellation of objects that constitute the field of new media. Interactivity is neither a new, exclusive quality initiated by new media nor is it a quality universal to all new media.

Manovich's dismissal of interactivity offers a useful starting point for considering the selfie as interactive narrative because it simultaneously demonstrates the need to consider the selfie within a longer tradition of autobiographical photography, but also because, as we will see, he significantly underplays the productive power of interactivity as a myth that emerges when digital photography becomes a widespread form of Social Media through apps like Instagram (another of Manovich's 'myths' about new media; 2001, pp. 68–70). The selfie of course preexisted the camera phone, but the emergence of the camera phone is instrumental to the selfie's evolution into a form of interactive narrative. Indeed, the series of media traces left behind by social interaction constitute a form of interactive media, a transcript of a conversation conducted in media form. While Manovich can of course be forgiven for not predicting the rise of social media, part of what the history of digital photography demonstrates is the need to

move beyond general categories and theories of analog vs. digital and toward a more focused consideration of the spheres and practices that emerge and fade as quickly as the trend of the selfie likely will.

Adam Levin's thoughtful discussion of the selfie unearths a great deal of the pre-digital history of the form, tracing it back through early self-portraits and linking it, for him, most directly with the polaroid. ("The Selfie in the Age of Digital Recursion," n.d.) For Levin, the recursive relationship between "selves, selfies and the [digital] ecologies they inhabit" exhibits a type of interactivity between culture, individuals and specific forms of technology. Photography has always demanded and documented certain performative behaviors of its subjects (e.g., the pose) which in turn alter social norms about how to not only behave in front of a camera but how to behave in general as well. The historical evolution of the technology for photographing the self recursively shapes the evolution of the self that is photographed, and vice versa, in a process that mimics the species/environment relationship in biological evolution.

While Levin's discussion unearths the media ecology in which the selfie evolves and thrives, it overlooks the importance, or perhaps the appropriateness, of still photography as the vehicle for this particular form of self/media interaction. Still photography was in many ways the first mass market form of mass media. As Patricia Zimmerman has demonstrated, the emergence of Kodak's roll film in the 1880s and its \$1 Brownie camera at the turn of the century pushed photography from a specialized technology practiced by professionals to a widespread group of amateur hobbyists that we would now refer to as 'users' (Zimmermann, 1995, p. 32). The move to market photography to a mass public, in modern terms democratizing or consumerizing the technology, makes it an important precursor to the emergence of user generated content over the last decade. Indeed, the push within social media to allow for mass content

sharing relies of course on the ability of the masses to create and distribute content easily and cheaply. Tools like the Brownie, and eventually the Polaroid, solved the first part of this equation, while their handheld descendent, the smartphone, solved the second.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of social media and mobile technology on photographic practice, not to mention the industry behind it. While the break between analog and digital photography generated a great deal of scholarly and popular discussion about the 'nature' of photography and the fate of indexicality, the break between the digital camera and the cameraphone is equally dramatic. Since the emergence of the iPhone in 2008, Apple has claimed that it makes the world's number one camera, and Kodak and Polaroid have both gone into bankruptcy. As Heidi Rae Cooley points out, the move toward "mobile screenic devices" troubles the easy distinction between amateur/professional (now everyone can 'publish' their work) and alters standards of aesthetics and subject matter. (Cooley, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) Cooley's account of early mobile imaging, published presciently in a pre-iPhone era, argues that users of early cameraphones and other handheld devices participate in a form of "self-evidencing", incessantly capturing fragmentary and ephemeral images of experiences and objects in their environments "tactile vision." While this produced an accumulation of autobiographical fragments to emerge, these collections operated according a database driven logic rather than a narrative logic of linear cause and effect.

Looking back at these early mobile devices and the social practices they engender, one is reminded, however, of the speed at which technologies change, and the recursive social behaviors that alter alongside them. Cooley's descriptions of PDAs, moblogs, and other bygone practices offer a look back at forms that were perhaps more primitive but also more radical in their approach than many

contemporary standards. While current devices may capture, edit and upload with a prowess only dreamed of by their predecessors, the resultant images and the streams they populate appear to be moving in a retrograde fashion toward more traditional aesthetics and a more rigidly linear forms. The emergence of social media platforms for sharing images, first on the computer and then through the smartphone, turned these early freewheeling experiments into a more standardized, mainstream practice.

Flickr emerged in the early days of social networking as a platform for users to upload, share and comment on one another's photos. While previous sites like Ofoto and Snapfish had enabled users to upload digital and analog images into albums for printing or sharing via email, Flickr was built as a community driven site from the beginning, allowing novel combinations and collections of images to emerge. Instead of treating user uploads as private material that it was storing and managing the way a web-based email account is handled, Flickr approached them as parts of a massive, open user-generated database of content. This approach opened up new perspectives while closing down others. The fragmentary, catalogic approach that Cooley described found a perfect complement in Flickr's bottom-up system of organization through user generated tags. This enabled categories and collections to emerge across users, creating a multi-perspective, multi-authored media text, what Jose Van Dijck refers to as a form of "connective memory" (Dijck, 2011, p. 411). But as Susan Murray points, the move from stand alone photoblogs to a site based on the contributions and interactions of its users produces a norming effect where an identifiable group aesthetic emerges (Murray, 2008, pp. 155, 159–160). While the Flickr aesthetic may bear little resemblance to the traditional studio or snapshot aesthetics that emerged in the analog film era, it is nonetheless appears to be a

move away from the diverse experimentation of the earliest mobile approaches.

The collective nature of sites like Flickr creates a space in which the individual is put under erasure by the weight of the group. Like a search on Google images, Flickr collections might offer a collective perspective on an event or subject, but they aren't any one person's perspective. They are more Wikipedia than Op-Ed page in the views they offer. This creates an interactive text in that all authors are simultaneously audience members (and vice versa), but it works against any type of linear progression or individual narrative. Murray points out that isolating an individual user's profile reveals an "autobiography or diary by layering an ever changing or growing stream of photos on their page" (Murray, 2008, p. 155). Nonetheless this feels counter to the general thrust of the site.

Instagram, on the other hand, conceived of and launched in a post-Facebook, post-iPhone moment, flips the group/individual hierarchy. Unlike Flickr and other photosharing sites intended to be the final destination for images that had traveled from camera to computer to website, Instagram emerged on the mobile iOS platform as a way for users to quickly edit photos shot on their iPhones and share them to other social networks like Twitter and Facebook. Rather than a large pool of curated images tagged by users according to specific subjects, the core of Instagram is the image stream and the strong connection between any image and an individual's profile wherever it might eventually end up. With the introduction of the front facing camera on the iPhone 4 and other competing devices on the Android platform, the selfie, as we currently think of it, was born, creating what can be considered a nascent form of interactive autobiography in the process.

In contrast to Flickr's disparate autobiographical fragments, Instagram's emphasis on the photo stream, and its 'instant' appearance on other social media timelines bind it more

firmly with a traditional notion of individual identity, temporal linearity and serial progression. While Nathan Hochman and Lev Manovich recently pointed out the inherent fuzziness in Instagram's presentation of this timeline (e.g. there are no timestamps), it remains nonetheless bound to a fixed temporal progression (Hochman & Manovich, 2013). Outside of the #hashtag, a self-tagging system borrowed from Twitter, there is no way to sort or search images on Instagram other than the default timeline of the photostream or one's feed.

And while the #hashtag loosely resembles Flickr's more robust tagging feature, it operates on the logic of the meme which it was intended to capitalize on and facilitate. As spontaneous trends which emerge and either catch on or fade away, memes are a transitory, amorphous collection of practices that have no single author. This would seem to put memes at odds with the strong identity connection that I am claiming Instagram engenders. Indeed, as Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli has pointed out, memes associated with the group Anonymous are intended to destabilize established categories of individuality, collectivity and recognizable identity (Ravetto-Biagioli, 2013). Instagram memes, of which the selfie trend is a prime example, are the polar opposite. Rather than acting as a cover to shield one's identity, trending hashtags are often used to raise one's profile or collect additional followers. Participation in memes like #bestofsummer are opportunities to distinguish one's individuality even as they signify participation in an ephemeral collective. Instagram emphasizes the 'me' in meme, as it were.

This push toward greater visibility on the site further enhances the autobiographical potential of the timeline. One actively and consistently populates one's stream (an individual user's contributions) in order to remain an active presence in the feed of one's followers (the flow of images comprised of contributions by the group one follows). The push to "feed

one's followers" gives the images the same ephemeral, disposable feel that many have noted is so at odds with the processes of freezing time associated with analog photography (Murray, 2008). And yet, these frequent updates also add to the permanent size of the individual photostream, giving additional depth to the record of one's activities and experiences. While the focus is always on a permanent sense of 'now' the by-product is a more complete documentary record of one's output arranged from past to present. Arranged in the default grid view, this record offers a type of timelapse portrait of one's activity. One can even imagine that an account comprised exclusively of selfies literally works as a sort of timelapse progression of aging.

The interplay between the feed and the stream is where the reciprocal give and take of Instagram enables the type of interactive exchange at work on Flickr. Users see the work of others, adapt their own in direct or indirect response to it, and post images seen in turn by others. The result over time is that many of the images begin to take on a homogenized aesthetic, an effect only exacerbated by the inclusion and widespread use of the app's filter function.

But the ability to alter these images nonetheless places them into a more expressive register than analog and even more traditional digital photography. The manipulative effect of using Photoshop editing tools in contexts such as photojournalism and fashion to alter what the camera recorded continues to be a source of anxiety amongst the viewers and creators of these images (Ritchin, 2010). But in Instagram, one expects the images to be manipulated. The app invites users to apply filters and crop the image before sending as one of the procedural steps for posting. Rather than hiding the alterations, filters loudly proclaim their presence through the excessive nature of their appearance. It is significant that these tools for the most part limit themselves to altering qualities like color, exposure, tone and framing rather than the less overt forms of

alteration like cutting and pasting, blemish removal, etc. The filtering process introduces an affective, expressive dimension to the image. This decreases its documentary value as an un-altered record of what existed before the camera, but increases its capacity to capture the desires and moods of its author. Filtered images do not claim “this is how it looked” but rather “how I wanted to it look” or “how I felt it looked.”

The net effect of the interface and the tools that Instagram provides is that someone’s stream can reveal an interesting, if idiosyncratic portrait of the person. Its most active high profile users are often professional photographers who use the platform as an outlet away from, or an avenue into, their paid work. In such cases the feed offers us an impression of their aesthetic sensibility. For others, Instagram is merely a way to push lightly edited individual or group photos to Facebook, thereby curating a feed that chronicles personal relationships and individual experiences. Looking through these portraits may tell us who the person is or who they want to be, the things they like or what society tells them they should be like. It would of course be foolish to generalize about the nature of this portrait or place too much weight on the documentary evidence it is capable of providing, but it can offer us alternative perspectives and ways of being that may differ very much from our own. By inviting us to share our selves, photographically, with the world, Instagram is part of the moment that produced the selfie.

The ubiquity of image making spawned by the camera-phone has enabled social media to function to some extent as ‘socialized media’: inviting alternative, image driven forms of social interaction even as it profits large corporations through the free labor of its citizens. This type of push-pull between community and commodity (or, community as commodity) has always haunted photography, marketed throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a way to preserve

memories and those ‘Kodak moments’. At once a tool of artistic expression and state surveillance and control, photography offers a complex historical lineage as it moves onto new platforms powerfully capable of both extremes. A cynical reading of filtering one’s appearance and experiences for an amorphous audience of others would argue that these tools simply allow users to imperfectly replicate the look and feel of advertising images or parrot the surface appeal of celebrity culture. A more generous reading might argue that these tools open up the process to a broader set of practitioners, allowing them to engage in a creative play of identity and self-expression, what Amelia Jones argued was a “technology of embodiment” in more traditional self-portrait photography (Jones, 2002). Once again we find the same mix of authenticity and commodification at work that has run throughout the history of photography, a potent combination that Instagram has apparently not escaped.

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