

Chapter 15

The Self of the Camera: Popular Practices of Photography and Self- Presentation in the New Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the revolution in self-representation across the cyber-space engendered by the advent of new interactive social medias. It argues that in the attempt to face the challenges of self-imaging in everyday life and in an era where discourses of “identities in flux” have become the norm, photographic trends on Facebook usage seek to portray a sense of coherence of the self through popular media practices. In this dimension, the new media spaces have provided a propitious space of autobiographic self-showing-narrating through a mixture of photos/texts in a way that deconstructs the privileges of self-narration hitherto available only to a privileged class of people. The self (and primarily the face) has thus become subject to a dynamic of personal and amateurish artistic practices that represent, from an existentialist perspective, the daily practices of self-making, un-making and re-making in articulating one’s (social) being.

INTRODUCTION

As a point of entry, let us pose the following questions with regard to the relationship between the camera, the cyberspace and the art of representation of reality: In recent times, can there be a life now without the camera pointed at the face, coercing it to surrender to the media? In recent media expansion, can “to be” now be anything less or other than “to be online”? What are the boundaries and horizons of a private life? Can there be any clean-cut distinction between private and public? Is there anything that is more real now than what is “virtually tangible”?

This chapter examines the poetics and tactics of self-invention, self-imagination and self-representation in the social media and how that has led to a new culture of the self in the everyday life. This article focuses specifically on the phenomenon of Facebook, one of the most popular of these media and one that arguably has the most revolutionary effect by its accessibility and capacity to make the face/self visible. On Facebook, the image culture of late capitalism is brought home to the self in a very literal

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sense. The chapter thus seeks to probe into the mechanics of self-representation on Facebook and how this enhances new insights about self-creation and self-invention in the social mediascape.

We live in a visual age and what consumes one's visual energy is of ultimate importance. The social space has become a battleground of vision between different medias and mediating screens. What attracts visual attention in real life has come under virulent competition from omni-present screens offered by new communication technology and the tertiary industries of social media outlets. In the subway or in the buses, passengers are glued to their screens and their facial reactions/mental mechanisms are more influenced by the mediated world in which they are engrossed than by what actually takes place around them. The waiting rooms, the subway waiting stations constantly assail the visual subjects with enormous energy. Henceforth, the question of visual consciousness of one's presence and location in space cannot be examined without proper and due consideration of the virtual dimension of our being and existence.

At the individual level, the way one looks, what one shows to the world and what aspects of the highlighted self are actually consumed by others is of capital importance. There is an obsession with the art of "looking good" according to generalized and internalized social codes. Images, etiquettes and stereotypes promoted by the media through advertisement, popular talk shows, entertainment industry, etc. have become assimilated as part of mass culture. From Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959), much water has passed under the bridge and the "everyday life" has been pervasively influenced if not hijacked by virtual life. The "home" has virtually given way to the "homepage" and where the vocabularies of convivial co-habitation in "real life" has been overtaken by its virtual correlates of walls, windows, web, sites, key, etc., new social media have created a propitious space of self-staging and enhanced the desire for individual representation. To underline the growing use of the netscape in modern life, Nicholas Mirzoeff affirms that:

These forms of visualization are now being challenged by interactive visual media like the Internet and virtual reality applications. Twenty-three million Americans were online in 1998, with many more joining in daily. In this swirl of imagery, seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life. (1999, p. 1)

Though access is far less than global, the Internet has reached hitherto enclaved corners of the world with tremendous speed. Sometimes Internet access conceals the dire economic sacrifices of its users, especially to those from the global South. Amongst the youth population all over the world, the social media now constitute the appropriate space for locating the *flâneur*, the stroller in the modern city. The functional modes of these spaces favor a strong tendency of cruising across the pages in a rather voyeuristic exploration of the vast landscape of desire. With the metronomic expansion of cybersphere, the camera, formerly a professional tool, an "arm" of the rich, or a rare family property, is now one of the most affordable gadgets of consumerist mass culture, asserting its power over almost every other asset due to its capacity to re-make and fix the self for socio-economic and even political exhibition. The very idea of the camera is built around a learning-on-the-job approach where amateurism is celebrated through a self-didactic apparatus, whose impact is always exponential. The camera holds the key to one's self-image. As Nicolas Mirzoeff puts it, "capital has commodified all aspects of everyday life, including the human body and even the process of looking itself" (1999, p. 27). Persons have used the camera invariably to recreate and project the image of the ideal or idealized self. Through the camera, the old and undesirable self is "shot" dead and smashed while a new image is minted and exhibited, with the edges of our body adequately trimmed in the process.

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