

Translated excerpt

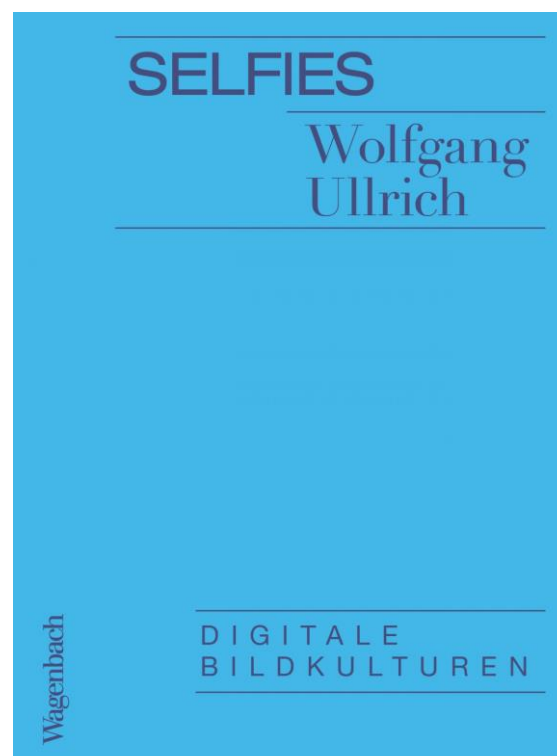
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Selfies. Die Rückkehr des öffentlichen Lebens

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Selfies: The Return of Public Life

Translated by David Burnett



01

A person who takes a selfie turns himself into an image. This is not the same as taking a simple picture of yourself, making a self-portrait. Taking a selfie means taking a picture of yourself in which you turn yourself into an image. A selfie, in other words, is actually a picture and an image. This may sound paradoxical or pedantic. It might even give the impression that analyzing selfies is a challenging task. But conventional wisdom regarding selfies posits quite the opposite. Most perceive them as extraordinarily trivial. They are often described as deficient, if not downright decadent.

02

The most common argument leveled against selfies is that they are obvious symptoms of a narcissistic era. For author and journalist Will Storr, the fact that smartphones are so often used to take selfies is evidence of self-infatuation. His book investigating this modern-day mentality in Western societies is appropriately titled *Selfie*.¹ One study after the next is published attempting to prove “that people who post staged self-portraits in social networks tend to be narcissists more often than the kind of person who refrains from such behavior.”² According to some of these studies, this is only true of men.³ Others try to prove the opposite (sometimes in the same journal): that women who are domineering and coquettish or exhibit other narcissistic qualities have a pronounced tendency to take selfies.⁴ Or they discover that selfies, rather than being evidence of narcissism, are actually one of its causes.⁵ All told, almost no one seems to write about selfies without some reference to “narcissism.”⁶

Many authors even suggest that the narcissism displayed by selfie addicts is placing them in harm’s way by making them less alert to dangers. Stories about selfie accidents are a recurring topoi of our day and age. Headlines such as the following are a standard feature of tabloids and the Internet: “Selfie Madness: Chinese Woman Poses Too Close to Tracks – Killed!”⁷ or “Pretty Blonde Plunges to Her Death While Trying to Take Selfie.”⁸ Selfie deaths, some suggest, have meanwhile become a statistically relevant cause of death: “Seventy-Three Selfie Deaths This Year and Counting.”⁹ The English version of Wikipedia even offers a separate article listing all reported selfie-related deaths and casualties.¹⁰

Most of these reports are brief, however. Causally linking “selfie” and “death” is apparently all we need to know, as if death were a just punishment, or at least an inevitable risk for people who take selfies. Christian dogma has thus found a secular counterpart to its concept

of mortal sins. Narcissism in the form of selfies appears to be a cardinal offense, comparable to the “superbia” of old – pride, arrogance, vanity. American (Catholic) radio host Teresa Tomeo warns that the cult of selfies is ruining relationships and friendships, that it disrupts and destroys family life, makes people blind and estranges them from God. She devotes an entire book to the “vices” selfies give rise to, and offers advice on how to avoid them.

The harsh criticism leveled against selfies differs from that of other visual genres, especially self-portraits. While there may have been occasional artists over the centuries who aroused suspicion by mainly choosing themselves as their subject, there was never a discourse condemning self-portraiture per se as a vice. Perhaps because it was always a small minority who created self-portraits, meaning that for reasons of quantity alone they were never very socially significant. But maybe it also has to do with the fact that, unlike in the case of self-portraits, a selfie is not just a picture a person takes of himself, but the picture of a person who turns himself into an image.

03

But what does it even mean to turn yourself into an image? And how exactly is a selfie made? Generally speaking, selfies are status reports capable of being sent as quickly as they’re made, whether to individual recipients or to the online community at large. Selfies allow you to communicate – in real time – where you happen to be, how you are feeling and what you’re experiencing at a given moment. They enable you to communicate a message more quickly, subtly and vividly than with words.

Selfies were only made possible with the advent of smartphone technology. While the introduction of roll film, Polaroids and digital cameras made taking pictures fast and easy for more people than ever before, it is only thanks to smartphones that people could communicate with others through photos, and it is only thanks to social media that these photos have a broad platform. Explaining the selfie boom as the result of technological innovation makes sense for the simple reason that a movement as massive as this would scarcely have been possible otherwise. Critics of selfies, on the other hand, who blame the boom on a psychosocial transformation, have a hard time explaining how this happened in just a few years. Why should millions of people have turned into narcissists overnight? And this at the same time almost everywhere in the world?

It’s a huge event, in other words, when for the first time in cultural history it’s become an

everyday occurrence for people to exchange messages, opinions and feelings in the form of images at any given moment. Images most likely functioned as signals and messages in earlier historical periods as well. They were meant to express a mood or draw attention to something, but they were much too clumsy, too bound to their material bodies to be sent in real time to places far removed from each other.

The visibility and mobility of images nowadays has led to a phenomenon that is often perceived as disconcerting and is one of the reasons for the bad reputation of selfies: the fact that their protagonists often appear with distorted, grimace-like, exaggerated facial features. But this is often just a form of self-protection, because anyone posting a selfie has to be prepared for negative comments or even a possible shitstorm, especially considering that it's virtually impossible to control who sees it and where. A self-enacted grimace, on the other hand, can prevent unintended consequences of this sort. The selfie is ironized and downplayed, while capturing the viewer's full attention and distracting him from more unpleasant things – a bad complexion or messy hair – that could be a source of embarrassment. The entire act of posting spills over into the comic and grotesque, and the distortion serves an apotropaic function – not unlike in the olden days when sculptures of hideous faces or animals decorated buildings as gargoyles and chimerae in order to ward off evil spirits. (Figs. 1a–d)

Other extreme facial expressions, by contrast, are born from the desire to make a splash and directly provoke a reaction. The impulse to let it all out only increases when the picture-taker bears sole responsibility for it. Whereas it used to be the photographer who gave instructions to the portrait-sitter and arranged the composition, with selfies there is no distinction, no physical barrier between author and subject. Unlike the painter of a self-portrait, the author of a selfie is often unable to recognize and influence the composition of the picture. A person pressed for time, who needs to crane his neck for the photo or who can't really see the display because it's at the end of a selfie stick will try all the harder to make sure that at least their face is expressive. The picture-taker's creative ambition is shifted from the overall photograph to the face at its center. This is precisely why there's more going on than a simple picture being taken, why the taker turns himself into an image in the process. (And even if the phone display acts as a mirror before the picture is taken, allowing some degree of control, the main focus is always on the face and not the overall composition. The display, like a mirror, is hardly perceived as an image carrier; all it shows is the face as an image.)

The conscious effort to control one's facial expressions and gestures in the process of creating

a self-image transforms a person's natural expressions into a creative performance. That's why people in selfies often seem so artificial. Their face, to the extent it becomes an image, is turned into an artefact. Eyes wide-open, tongue sticking out, lips pursed – these and others are standard expressions in selfies. And critics, just as predictably, bemoan the loss of authenticity implicit in this artificiality. They allege that “clearly recognizable poses” like the “duck face” – pouty lips and sucked-in cheeks – are actually an indication of a total lack of individuality, that said person is merely imitating what they've seen other, probably more famous people do. Selfies, in other words, are “sheer show-off images.”¹²

But making a self-image not only means working on your own facial expression or imitating a model, it also means visualizing and enhancing your own visibility. Being explicitly visible, on the other hand, means gearing yourself towards an audience, towards those who will see the selfie. While some might call this a social act, it gives critics yet another reason to bemoan the loss of authenticity. Or is it not opportunistic and hence a form of self-abnegation to gear oneself to the expectations of others, turning yourself into a clown, so to speak, just to make them laugh?

Selfie opponents, in other words, have a problem with the idea of people turning themselves into images. The moment people pay greater attention to their appearance and its impact, the moment they externalize themselves and become pure expression they reduce themselves to their surface value and invariably become superficial, or so these critics claim. Narcissism, according to this take, is not the result of an overly strong sense of self but is actually the sign of an individual's weakness, of a person who only turns himself into an image because he needs to be loved and admired. The selfies of supposed narcissists are contrasted with the self-portraits of artists, which earn the critics' admiration for the self-knowledge and self-reflection that allegedly underlie them.

04

Those who take selfies draw attention to themselves, put themselves on display, address themselves, think and act in categories of expression. Attention of this sort is a form of self-staging. Anyone who holds up a phone to their face in order to take a selfie is behaving like an actor. And, like an actor, the producer of a selfie is aware of his visibility, knows that every movement, every detail of his facial expression will be closely observed and acquire a meaning. Both actors and selfie-makers are in complete control of their facial expressions. They are both well aware of how much depends on the image they convey.

A photo series by Wolfram Hahn illustrates how concentrated, tense and outside the normality of daily life a selfie-taker is. Hahn's protagonists are exposed, in the spotlight of their phones as if they were on a stage. Apparently they have a precise idea of what should be visible in the picture they're taking.¹³ (figs. 2a–b)

The producers of a selfie therefore slip into a specific role. They refer to certain codes in order to make themselves intelligible to others. Just as a stage actor does not embody herself but a role, a selfie actor, too, appears as the representative of a certain milieu, situation or set-up. A selfie shows being-on-vacation or newly-in-love or in-good-shape – preferably in a stereotypical, immediately recognizable way, and hence often bolstered by emojis or hashtags. (figs 3a–d)

The fact that the picture-taker slips into a role in the process belies the critique that selfies are not authentic. They should in fact be judged by the same criteria applied to a theater performance – that is to say, how an actor interprets a given role and what he makes of it. Is it dramatized, refracted through irony or combined with another role? The rule of thumb in theater applies even more so to selfies: facial expressions are “a performance enacted with the face.” That's how art historian Hans Belting puts it, in his book on the “history of the face,” elaborating how the facial gestures of actors, who play their parts “with their real faces,” can themselves become a work of art or at any rate take on the character of a “mask.”¹⁴ A recurring theme in discourses on acting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this notion once again became topical in the era of silent movies. The latter obviously needed to compensate the lack of language, often leading to similarly exaggerated and mask-like facial expressions – which were likewise criticized for being artificial and grotesque – just like in the case of selfies, which, provided they are static photos, also circulate wordlessly. (figs. 4a–b)

Belting, in his deliberations on the face, facial gestures and masks, references philosopher Helmuth Plessner, who in his essay “On the Anthropology of the Actor” (1948) advances the hypothesis that acting is merely an extreme form of what happens with every human being. Generally speaking, “human life” should be understood as the “embodiment of a role according to a more or less fixed blueprint of an image.”¹⁵ In the case of an actor, however, attention is focused entirely “on the image” he makes of himself, whereas a normal individual “mastering his role” is oblivious to everything else, he loses all sense of his own visibility.¹⁶ In the age of selfies this dichotomy no longer applies. Many people dabble in a practice nowadays that resembles that of actors. They turn their own bodies – to apply Plessner's words

to the producers of selfies – into an “artistic tool,” the quality of expression being dependent upon the “creative abilities of the performer.”¹⁷ Thus, people with a talent for acting are at an advantage, as put forth by a 2016 study. Accordingly, people with a tendency to heightened self-expression and extroverted behavior (“histrionic personalities”) take considerably more selfies than those who are less inclined to theatrical behavior.¹⁸

It should therefore come as no surprise that one of the most famous selfies shows an unusual gathering of actors. At the Oscar ceremony in March 2014, the host Ellen DeGeneres managed to capture a range of stars – from Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts to Brad Pitt and the then still well-regarded Kevin Spacey – in a group selfie. Her plan to set a record for posting the photo with the most retweets proved successful, temporarily bringing Twitter to a halt. More than two million people forwarded the selfie within the next two hours.¹⁹

The recipients might have easily thought that the picture was a photomontage – less because of the density of stars than because of their professional faces. Each one of them an iconic image with seasoned facial expressions that almost seem like masks. These selfie faces appear to be covering their actual faces – softer and less distinctive in their expression. As if they were mounted on top of them. In other words, a handful of the most successful and photogenic actors in the world demonstrated the possibilities inherent to turning oneself into an image through a selfie. (fig. 5)

05

But many people who take selfies are neither talented nor practiced enough to create a convincing self-image. Their facial expressions are never quite under control. Deliberate earnestness can quickly become an embarrassment when staged in front of a phone camera. They would need actual masks to pull off the role they’re playing. This gap in the market has long been identified. Special apps offer digital makeup artistry, allowing you to not only smooth your skin and improve your complexion but also to enhance your facial expressions and lend them certain codes. Filters reshape and distort the photographic image or even add graphic elements. Your nose becomes a cat’s, a floral wreath is placed on your head or you turn into a skeleton zombie. Instead of subtle corrections the filters offer crass exaggerations and reduce each individual to a simple stock character or cartoon-like caricature. But they also free the selfie producer of the “burden of creating an image,” which Plessner accords to everyone who is not a professional actor.²⁰ (figs. 6a–d)

The fact that an app released in 2015 under the name *MSQRD* – “masquerade” without the

vowels – expressly describes its filters as masks bespeaks an exact understanding of what happens in the process of taking a selfie. If masks have always served to amplify and schematize facial expressions, and if they were always used whenever people “needed more face than the body could give,” then apps like *MSQRD* fulfill this very function for people taking selfies.²¹ (The app was indeed so successful that Facebook bought it after just one year on the market.) (fig. 7)

Their attractiveness is further enhanced by sophisticated software that allows the masks to be changed almost instantaneously. Thus, a large number of the selfies posted on a daily basis show masked faces, often altered beyond recognition. These demonstrate that selfies, rather than revealing one’s true self, are often more a form of role playing, even aiming to hide a person’s real facial features for the sake of protecting one’s privacy. The fact that apps like Snapchat offer new masks and effects every day takes the pressure off users of social media to routinely post something original or funny.

If people taking selfies no longer rely on their own facial expressions but choose a mask instead, hence replacing their natural expression with an artificial one, this tendency runs counter to developments in the history of theater. In antiquity actors often wore masks which expressed the qualities of the character they embodied (rather than their own). There were different masks for comedies and tragedies, making individual protagonists immediately and easily recognizable. Many forms of theater in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries followed the same idea of the consciously artificial. Only gradually were masks replaced with makeup, eventually resulting in the notion, still prevalent today, that actors should wholly rely on their own expressiveness to convey the characteristics of their role. Movies and television reinforced this notion, and so the modern era became the age of great character actors, who embody their roles with their entire being and the mutually supportive help of facial features and expressions. And yet nowadays, in the age of selfies, where countless people have morphed into amateur actors, we are slowly readopting the practices of ancient theater. From one moment to the next we can go from being a zombie to a cat. (figs. 8a–b)

06

Selfie culture has brought the return of a form of public life described most accurately in the 1970s by sociologist Richard Sennett. In *The Fall of Public Man* he showed how strongly in the eighteenth century the idea of public life was still determined by the notion of people being capable of acting. From polite language to clothing styles, from the depiction of

emotions to the wearing of masks, there was a constant emphasis on form and an understanding of life as a theater, in which people were viewed as multifaceted social beings rather than individuals. Theater was in fact an inspiration for the role playing of public life. In their attitudes and their self-understanding, people scarcely differed from actors. The metaphorical notion that “all the world’s a stage” (*theatrum mundi*) common since antiquity was taken quite literally. Public roles were enthusiastically embraced and performed with the zeal and ambition of actors performing on stage. It was all about the “representation of emotion” and a “general pattern of experience”; the idea of authenticity would have been alien to people of that era.²²

The reason there was no emphasis on expressing individuality, in Sennett’s interpretation, was because in the eighteenth century one mainly encountered strangers on the streets of cities like Paris and London. It would have been out of place, even risky, to reveal too much of one’s self. At the same time, public life was considered an opportunity to improve one’s status and reputation. Instead of disparaging role playing as a vain and calculating exercise in self-staging it was seen as a demanding task that allowed the individual to demonstrate his creative and social skills. Not until the modern era did “theatricality [have] a special, hostile relation to intimacy,” according to Sennett. In an anonymous industrial society people moved towards an “inner-directed condition” and sought meaning in the private sphere.²³

The emergence of social media, however, has changed the experience and self-understanding of those who actively participate in it. Critics are eager to point out that people have way more “friends” on Facebook than they could ever meet in “real life.” But instead of lamenting the demise of “real” friendship we might think about what it means to acknowledge on a daily basis in our own timelines and feeds the comments and posts of people we don’t know personally. Being a stranger no longer means anonymity. Rather, we often know much more about the people we follow on social media than we do about our own close friends and family members – and, conversely, strangers can have a much more detailed picture of us if we’re active on social media and making our lives public than they do of their own immediate family members. Is this tendency to role playing and mask wearing not the direct result of an increased desire to have a public life alongside a private one?

To be sure, this new public sphere is a media-based one. People don’t enter a real public space. Unlike in earlier days, they don’t need to leave their private sphere to assume public personas. Thus, things are not like in the eighteenth century when the public and the private were separate spheres. Instead, for the first time in history it’s possible for the private to

become public. Unlike in the modern world, when attempts were made to shield our private lives from any publicity, now this privacy is publicly represented without our having to give it up. Role playing in the media sphere allows varied ways of performing and hence protecting the private self. We live this self in its own right – in the original, as it were – while simultaneously showcasing it in the form of a stylized reproduction at various accounts and platforms on the Web.

Selfies thereby serve as a perfect facade for the private sphere. They show us people in predominantly private situations: with their partners and their children, on vacation and day trips, together at the dinner table, at home, in front of the mirror, or even in the bathtub or in bed. And yet these images seldom seem overly revealing or transgressive. They follow the conventions of self-enactment too closely for that to be the case: people playing a role and wearing the corresponding mask. In other words selfies generally reveal very little about a person's emotional state; what they showcase follows its own logic and fulfills a need for stereotyping, caricature and exaggeration. Selfies are media doubles of those who turn themselves into an image. (figs. 9a–d)

Notes

1 Will Storr: *Selfie: How We Became So Self-Obsessed and What It's Doing to Us*, London 2018.

2 <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/menschen/studie-sel-fie-sucht-entlarvt-narzissen-13360922.html>.

3 See Piotr Sorokowski et al.: “Selfie Posting Behaviors are Associated with Narcissism Among Men,” in: *Personality and Individual Differences* 85 (2015), pp. 123–127.

4 See Eric B. Weiser: “#Me: Narcissism and Its Facets as Predictors of Selfie-posting Frequency,” in: *Personality and Individual Differences* 86 (2015), pp. 477–481.

5 See Daniel Halpern et al.: “‘Selfie-ists’ or ‘Narci-selfiers’? A Cross-lagged Panel Analysis of Selfie Taking and Narcissism,” in: *Personality and Individual Differences* 97 (2016), pp. 98–101.

6 See, e.g., Harry Eyres: “The Unselfknowing Self,” in: Roger Scruton (ed.): *Self Expression in the Age of Instant Communication*, Venice 2015, pp. 16–23. – Elsa Godart: *Je selfie donc je suis. Les metamorphoses du moi à l'ère du virtuel*, Paris 2016, pp. 74ff. – Ilan Stavans: *I Love My Selfie*, Durham 2017, pp. 14f. – Marion Zilio: *Faceworld. Le visage au XXIe siècle*, Paris 2018, pp. 90ff. – A very good and critical take on the topos of narcissism is provided by Michael Bauer: “#selfie

#Narzissmus #ethische_Debatte?_Argumente,” in: Tanja Gojny/Kathrin S. Kürzinger/Susanne Schwarz (eds.): *Selfie – I like it. Anthropologische und ethische Implikationen digitaler Selbstinszenierung*, Stuttgart 2016, pp. 73–101.

7 <https://www.bild.de/news/ausland/selfie/maedchen-china-zug-er-fasst-beim-selfie-tot-45324212.bild.html>.

8 <https://www.tag24.de/nachrichten/london-sie-wollte-selfies-schiessen-und-verunglueckte-dabei-toedlich-fotos-sturz-fenster-tot-381840>.

9 <https://www.bild.de/news/ausland/selfie/toedliche-gefahr-durch-selfies-opfer-48834628.bild.html>.

10 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_selfie-related_injuries_and_deaths.

11 Teresa Tomeo: *Beyond Me, My Selfie and I: Finding Real Happiness in a Self-Absorbed World*, Cincinnati 2016.

12 Katharina Lobinger/Cornelia Brantner: “In the Eye of the Beholder: Subjective Views on the Authenticity of Selfies,” in: *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015), pp. 1848–1860, here pp. 1853f.

13 Vgl. <http://www.wolframhahn.de/projects/into-the-light/>.

14 Hans Belting: *Faces. Eine Geschichte des Gesichts*, Munich 2013, pp. 35, 64.

15 Helmuth Plessner: “Zur Anthropologie des Schauspielers” (1948), in: idem: *Ausdruck und menschliche Natur. Gesammelte Schriften VII*, Frankfurt am Main 2003, pp. 399–418, here p. 414.

16 Ibid., pp. 407.

17 Ibid., pp. 408, 416.

18 See Piotr Sorokowski et al.: “Sex Differences in Online Selfie Posting Behaviors Predict Histrionic Personality Scores Among Men But Not Women,” in: *Computers in Human Behavior* 59 (2016), pp. 368–373.

19 See <https://twitter.com/TheEllenShow/status/440322224407314432/photo/1>.

20 Helmuth Plessner, loc. cit. (fn. 15), p. 411.

21 Hans Belting, loc. cit. (fn. 14), p. 43.

22 Richard Sennett: *The Fall of Public Man: The Forces Eroding Public Life and Burdening the Modern Psyche with Roles it Cannot Perform*, New York: Norton, 1992 [1977], pp. 107f.

23 Ibid., pp. 37, 5.