Selfie-Wars on Social Media

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Abstract: The image-related self-thematization using digital communication technologies is a central cultural pattern of postmodern society. Considering these assumptions, this paper raises the question of whether, and in what way, practices of identity construction are changing, as part of the development of new digital and interactive media. The continuous change in media, society and technology in present visual cultures has led to the perception that images should be seen as an essential contribution to the formation of society and subjectivity. Along these lines, this submission analyses selfies as formats of communication and clarifies media-specific aspects of online communication. In this context, the paper focuses on the recurring features of selfies on the level of conventions of visual aesthetics, semantic encodings, media dispositives and stereotypical structures of interaction. With this perspective, it is possible to acquire a more detailed understanding of this relationship once it becomes clear in which way the visual practice and the aesthetics of photographic self-representation collaborate with the networking culture of social media.

1. Introduction

The image related to self-thematization using digital communication technologies is a central aspect of postmodern culture. While, according to Goffman, the presentation of self from face-to-face interaction is a universal human activity (Goffman 1959), contemporary shifts occurring in the area of self-presentation and the self-thematization, mark a distinct cultural feature of today's increasingly digitally networked communication society. The term self-thematization refers to individuals creating a virtual version of themselves via their communication process. Via social media self-reorientations, users link the socially shared content with modes of self-representation (Peraica 2017; Depkat 2019, p. 20). In contemporary society, self-presentation has become the hegemonic form of self-thematization (Hong et al. 2020, pp. 106–59).

In the tradition of actor-oriented sociology, I first understand self-thematization simply as the reflexive and communicative relationship of the subject to itself. Individuals can relate to and perceive themselves as another by being at a distance from themselves and, in this sense, when self-imaging occurs, the subject is able to have self-awareness (Hahn 1987). However, in this process, what else transpires? What are the social conditions for self-reference? How do the practice, function

and aesthetics of biographical self-reflection impact one's personal relationships? My interest here is not only to determine the varieties of self-thematization in the social media system, but also to examine economic agents and cultural techniques of surveillance and transparency.

Selfies are interconnected with digital surveillance cultures and by means of clicks, likes, tags and comments they are continuously interwoven with cultural techniques of naming, collecting, evaluating and counting (Flasche 2020, pp. 157–70). In this chapter, I am concerned with the question if practices of identity construction are changing due to the expansion of new digital and interactive media? Can the individual escape social pressure, and technological regulation of their life? Why are pictorial anonymization practices on online platforms increasingly widespread? In addition, how do self-image makers confront the social constraints and obsessions of self-imaging one's likeness? Via the deprivation, absence or disappearance of the face, strategies of desubjectivization can act as interventions into established expectations and procedures of visibility on online platforms.

Considering these assumptions, my chapter raises the question whether and in what way practices of identity construction are changing, as part of the development of new digital and interactive media (Doy 2004; Snickars and Vonderau 2012).

The continuous change in media, society and technology in present visual cultures has (first in the cultural and media studies and later in the Social Sciences) led to the perception, that images should be seen as an essential contribution to the formation of society and subjectivity (Darley 2000; van Dijck 2008, pp. 57–76). New forms of social network as well as new interactive media publics emerged with the deployment of technical images and the increased generalization of visual skills, which led to the arrival of a wide autodidactic activity in digital image culture (Hjorth 2007, pp. 227–38; Hjorth et al. 2012) (Figure 1).

The main purposes of this chapter consist of the following priorities: Analysis of the reciprocal relations between the infrastructural possibilities of digital media (Clark 2020, pp. 87–93), the digital methods of image research and the aesthetic practices of self-thematization (Tiggemann et al. 2020, pp. 175–82). This chapter is dealing will with visual practices of self-thematization in the context of *different strategies of performativity*:

(1) When dealing with selfies generated by users, the key questions are: What is the performative role of initiators of visual uploads (cf. (Grace 2013, pp. 135–62))? What is the status of collective and collaborative framing processes in connection with selfies' production of meaning, negotiation and distribution in online portals and social media formats?

(2) The tendency to resignify and reiterate existing content (mashup, remix) points to a performative aspect that is an expression of collaborative framing processes that elude subsumtion under any intersubjectively controllable field of discourse

(Literat 2019, pp. 1168–84). Keeping that in mind, the productive force of the performative does not just lie in creating something, but in handling something we have not created ourselves. In this sense, performative implementation can be understood as an excess of meaning that not just realizes a new performative frame, but also retroactively modifies existing content.

(3) Performative processes on the internet are the result of technological enablement. Specifically, it is the computer-assisted information and communication technologies that regulate the modes, validity and distribution of user-generated content (Reichert 2013, pp. 223–57). Web media are significantly involved in the production of meaning and relevance and thus have to be included in the examination of performative processes.
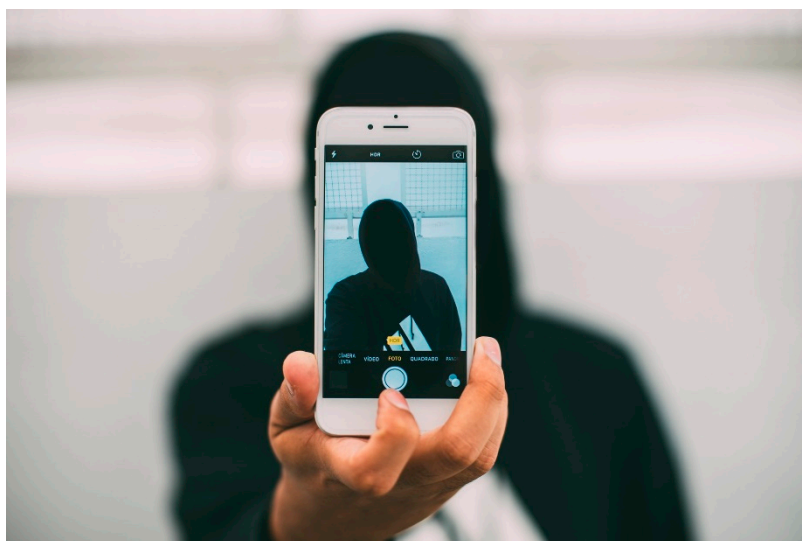

Figure 1. The non-showing of the face is demonstrated. Source: Pixabay.

2. Visual Communication Analysis

This chapter is based on the fundamental hypothesis that image practices should be regarded as practices linked from a communicative and media-technological perspective. It shall thus develop a distinct visual communication analysis focusing on the following priorities:

Analysis of visual communication in technical-medial environments: Modern research on the historical and cultural significance of images follows an extended image concept, including the technical and media conditions of visual perception. One of the explanatory concepts for the function and meaning of media, its user and the society is the media dispositive, which, compared to the concepts of public and

culture, relates most closely to the media itself. The productivity of this approach of relating the dispositive and the medium to one another lies in the fact that the various areas of a medium—such as technology or apparatus, institutional context, economic dimension, production practices, aesthetic processes and styles, use and reception modes—can be seen as a network that is shaping visual perception.

In this respect, my approach is oriented in terms of practice theory as I am assessing the complex interference of iconic, text-based and informatics-related entanglements of meaning that arise with the recording, editing, publishing and distribution of selfies on online platforms, social network sites and sharing apps. The chapter explores the interrelations between visual data objects, image-related and discursive processes of the construction of meaning and meta-data, which "facilitate classification and archiving, displaying origin (authorship, ownership and conditions for use)" (see (Rubinstein and Sluis 2008, p. 151)).

As venues hosting diverging ways of looking and cultures of seeing, I am evaluating not only image practice in a narrow sense but also the methods of categorization, encoding and commenting (hashtags, emojis, threads, GIFs, hyperlinks) as well as cross-medial/multi-modal strategies of distribution and analysis closely linked therewith (Social Insight, SocialRank, Hootsuite, Iconosquare, Social Media Radar), which the users of online platforms and messenger services create due to their social visibility and being-seen. Constituting *bildbasierte Handlung*, image-based selfies are embedded in the situation of subjects of technization into an empowering action. We shall situate the performative aspects of acting with images on a multi-modal level, which is supposed to cover the entire range of selfie communication and selfie storytelling in mobile/multimedia communication networks (writing-based texts, hashtags, emojis, GIFs, hyperlinks, threads) (Senft and Baym 2015).

Image repertoires and image memory: Image practices are always at the same time visual practices, and selfies always relate to models, i.e., pre-figurations. They are involved in reference contexts and webs of meaning in the sense of being "an endless sequence of representations" (Rheinberger 2002, p. 112). Alongside this perspective, this investigation houses an interpretation analysis evaluating digital self-images in the contexts of both their production and their reception as communicative image action of "deterritorialised communities" (Abidin 2016) and regarding selfies as temporalized, chosen patterns of action, communication and identification, which allow new forms of media subjectivity within the broad range of objectivizing self-measurement and individualized self-inspection. With online platforms, messenger services and social network sites being differentiated into closed spaces of communication ("all-in-one-media", (Helmond 2015). I can explore visual communication scripts designed to build digital identity (Senft 2013) which have brought about specific image repertoires (Silverman 1997) and memory cultures

(Marwick 2015) in different online spaces of communication, such as theatrical self-stagings on Instagram and Facebook and reciprocal forms of communication on WhatsApp, Twitter and Snapchat.

Style communication analysis: At the centre of our *style communication analysis* stands the comparative analysis of the image-based expression in the context of *styles of designing* visual compositions (Papacharissi 2010). Using open-method approaches of quality-oriented image research (Mitchell 1995), it can be possible to decipher the visual pulse of the selfie generation. Before this background, the style communication analysis is focused on the formal aesthetics of highlighting, emphasis, hiding and omission in framing, image genres, plot episodes, constellations of interaction and the level of image–text and image–image relationships to distinctions in terms of gender, age and social layer (Tifentale 2014). The study explores fluid and trans-local relationship networks in order to document changes in the image stock and associated patterns of use, appropriation and interaction. This approach allows for a formation of categories and a potential probing of visual relationships, which may be exploited both synchronically (as compared to other digital self-portraits on online platforms) and diachronically (as compared to cultural image repertoires and historical reference images). From this point of view, I may query the image evidence of selfies regarding their cultural and historical contingencies.

Visual communication and platform-based communities: How can I methodically prove the influence of technical-medial environments of social media apps on the venues of interaction and negotiation in subject-centred visual communication? (Helmond 2015). In what way do platform-based conditions such as the subscriber principle or the feature of hashtagging create globalized spaces of communication for the increased significance of communicative acting with images, new iconic styles of staging or conventional image repertoires and gender stereotypes (Reichert 2014a, 87 et seq.)? Can I regard the selfie phenomenon to be a paradigm shift in the development of a global public, as selfies, like emoticons, have become a "global language" and "establishing a universally applicable form of communication for the first time in the history of mankind"? (Ullrich 2019, p. 14).

3. Generation Selfie

In the context of the research question outlined above, my approach to selfie culture distances itself from the idea of hypostatized self-reference, in which media are viewed as mere tools for the depiction of a subject that already exists in real life. In following this research perspective approach to autobiographical mediality, I grant the medium a constituting meaning in the process of subject constitution and am therefore able to look for a self-reference that constitutes itself through media, i.e., upon recording, storage and distribution. Identity- and subject-related research that considers the medium's influence on the process of subjectification a distinct research

question and an independent field of scholarship directs our attention to what is referred to using the analytical terms "dispositive" and "media-related reflectivity" in media-related analyses of subjectivity. It also turns our focus to the mediality of the medium and examines how historic places of remembrance and social image cultures are helped into existence by means of media arrangements, processes and formats (Galloway 2004). The aesthetic practices of identity construction in online media (Vitak 2012) not only medialize individual subject concepts, but also resemanticize collective places of remembrance which are presented as 'personalizable' by means of selfies. Against this background, I can address, for example, the aesthetic forms of self-staging that push the self into the center and the media-related proximity to the recording medium of smartphone photography ("arm-length away") that this self-documentation provokes. The digital media of self-documentation using smartphone technologies of permanent connectivity and their spatial annotations (Snapchat and the like) also open up novel spaces of agency for self-modelling, as these self-images are always also involved in digital usage contexts, such as tracking (Papacharissi 2010), gamification (Fuchs et al. 2014), and surveillance (Lyon 2001; Fuchs 2011, pp. 31–70; Andrejevic 2011, pp. 278–87). However, the commercially motivated addressing of users as producers of their own self-image (DIY aesthetic) should not obscure the fact that selfies are always located in digital media cultures and linked with the cultural techniques of naming, collecting, rating and counting within the economies of digital cross-linking by means of clicks, likes, tags and comments (cf. the aspect of medialization as a ritual and the standardization of self-representation associated with it, e.g., #tbt, #aftersex, #museumselfie).

Facilitated multi-media self-publication on the internet also enables new forms of infrastructural appropriation and collective interlinking. DIY culture is characteristic of the low-level, time-sparing production of self-images. This culture of "doing it yourself" not only opens up a new interrelation between practices of self-reference and media-related technologies; it also influences the representations of the self as an aesthetic means. These self-representations can be taken as an additional object of examination as image-cultural elements, shapes and formats regarding their historical, cultural and media-related subject construction: "As an emblematic part of the social media's increased "visual turn," selfies provide opportunities for scholars to develop best practices for interpreting images online in rigorous ways" (Senft 2013). Against this background, selfies can be examined for their *genre-specific* cultivation aspects and their relationships to *media-specific* formats. As a result, this research approach creates portfolios of genre-, format-, and media-specific image cultures and asks the related question which network-specific status selfies can have within the circulation sphere of social media platforms. This chapter is thus understood to be an extension to the works of Turkle (1995, 2011), Mirzoeff (2013), and Knoblauch et al. (2008) in terms of media and subject theory, image culture and

communication sociology. It regards selfies as facilitations of visual communication by which specific orientations for action, image-aesthetic subject models and social integration are provided for the purpose of medialized self-thematization.

Based on the above, I will examine relationships of individuals to the media-based means of acting and expression that they use to model their own subjectivity in the context of social requirements. A debate concerning the epistemological and sociological status of the image has been incessantly going on since the early 1990s, though under different names, such as the "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 1995), the "visual turn" (Cartwright and Sturken 2001) or "visual methods" (Rose 2001; Knoblauch et al. 2008; Hughes 2012). This debate will result in the question to what extent images and visual media help represent, influence, and thereby reshape persons or subjects.

I will try to observe the recurring features of *selfies* on the level of conventions of visual aesthetics, semantic encodings, media dispositives and stereotypical structures of interaction. What makes the format of selfies particularly attractive for analysis is the fact that analyzing the communicative forms of selfies (1) allows the demonstration of how the medialization of the self has changed through media techniques and (2) facilitates discussion of the individual liquefactions of technological dispositives and social framings. In this sense, the history of human subjectivity is closely linked to all different kinds of mediation through media and can be divided into self-thematization in writing, through mass media, and through individual media. A new form of self-thematization ensues as the mass media undergo pluralization in particular based on their privatization. Being private increasingly becomes a resource (of attention), blurring the lines between what is private and what is public. Privacy, personal confessions, staged self-representation, etc. become issues of more or less new kinds of mass-media formats (Turkle 1995) that also extend to interactive online media. From this perspective, digital networks can always be taken as media arrangements exerting institutional and normative pressure on the agents involved to participate in the process of self-thematization. Against this background, the life story, which is perceived as feasible and predictable, becomes the object of narrative strategies used in a media context to ground one's own life by means of "narrative styles of identity" (Thomä 1998, p. 62), "multi-media media formats" (Doy 2004; Reichert 2008, p. 47) and forms of "gender staging" (Davidov 1998). Alois Hahn refers to the communicative institutions of self-thematization as biography generators and points out their meaning for the practical self-relations of individuals. Both the individualized types of reflective self-representation and those accounts of self-thematization that are structured by institutional specifications are used for real-world orientation in one's everyday behavior, but also act as a social mechanism for normalization, integration and social control.

4. Performing the Self

Auto-documentation processes in media, e.g., selfies, are therefore part of collectively shared general principles of contemporary society that can be grounded in the reference frame of a long-term historical establishment of communicative institutions and norms of self-thematization. As a consequence, not only do individuals make themselves the subject of communication and, thus, the object of knowledge, but also socially habitualized forms of communication place the individual in a certain relationship to others and thereby themselves. The subject can only become a model for action and an object of knowledge when society boasts appropriate institutional framework conditions addressing the subject in general as the causal agent of self-thematization. The stylistic features of visual self-representation thus point not as much to an individuality of subjects, but rather to historical, socially conditioned ways of subjectification that can be discerned very well from the way selfies are employed. Initial approaches to theoretically and terminologically capture visual self-representation on the social web have been presented by Richard (2010), who has analyzed the cultural image-related behavior on social network sites (dating sites, micro-blogging portals, and young-adult websites) for the generation of social relationships.

In contrast, I want to examine visual self-thematization in social media of web 2.0 intends to make its own distinct contribution to digital usage research. This contribution will include (1) developing programs for data collection, data modeling and data visualization (Manovich 2012); (2) data critically reflecting standard technologies, resources and analysis tools of native-digital web analysis (Rogers 2013) and social media analysis (Boyd and Ellison 2007; van Dijck 2013); (3) laying the methodological groundwork for analyzing visual objects on the internet to be used to systematically develop, for the first time, source-critical standards for visual self-thematization. Our contribution will be (4) derived from the time-diagnostic claim to elaborate on the status of digital image and communication media in generating subjectivity mediated by media.

I therefore intend to extend the issue of the nature of images as bringing about reality and subjectivity to individual visual media that manifests itself in the visual medium is particularly apt in producing an effect of reality. The effect of reality is an attempt to explain the phenomenon that interweaving image/text generates particularly efficacious visible effects. In this context, I consider technological and media-related infrastructures (Kittler 1998, pp. 119–32), and I also consider the increasing penetration of image, text and materiality by information and distribution and the respective multi-modal forms of communication (Bateman 2008) as well as user-specific cultures of usage (Reichert 2008; Boyd 2008). According to Turkle (1995), mediatized communication invites individuals to self-thematize, while by doing so, they have to fit the creation of socially accepted self-images into the margins of media

infrastructures. Individuals model themselves as subjects using these participatory, marketized cultural techniques, proving themselves in the arenas of the social web. This thesis is also supported by Birgit Richard (2010), who has delved into visual self-representation particularly within youth cultures. As a consequence, the visual, i.e., physical shapes of expression bring about new communication structures. As important as these participatory communication structures are, one should not neglect their economic and political interdependencies, but instead consider them a practice of self-thematization that determines the format. In this respect, not only the selfies as content, but the technological infrastructures of networking cultures (forums, platforms) are embedded in economic and political structures, which results in the formation of ways of self-governing and in the enforcement of self-representation standards. Accordingly, the analysis of an economically and politically embedded communication structure also involves considering storage, thesaurization, and feedback structures that find use in various areas of everyday and popular culture. Feedback systems, performance comparisons, quality rankings, monitoring, matching, benchmarking, statistical evaluation, flexible process control, self-awareness catalysts, satisfaction measurements—all such systemically cybernetic control functions and observational contexts of mutual evaluation and assessment are functional elements of web 2.0 media technology. (Sawyer et al. 2020, pp. 94–100) In this context, it should also be considered—and the first research papers on this subject have already been published (Boyd 2008)—that various platforms for the distribution of videos exhibit a dimension of an unbalanced social structure. There are agents who distribute their self-representations via different social networking sites depending on class and education status. Clearly showing a new sensitivity for this both technological and social change, which also calls for new aesthetic efforts, my essay attempts to reconcile visually aesthetic and media-dispositive research perspectives and accordingly regards selfies as *performative media*. Based on Erika Fischer-Lichte's (2002, 2004) theory of performative action the concept of the performative is used to demonstrate the procedural staging, implementing, and transforming practices of visual self-thematization. Interactive media systems and associated collective and collaborative media practices have formed in the interconnected communication spaces of the digital world, comprising all areas of production, distribution, exploitation and evaluation of media content (Deuze 2007, pp. 243–63). A dynamic and ostensibly transient production of meaning in the social media of web 2.0 can thus be revealed from a performative perspective, which pushes the productive and procedural character of collaborative practices into the focus of analysis (Cartwright and Sturken 2001).

When dealing with selfies generated by users, the key questions are: What is the performative role of initiators of visual uploads (cf. (Grace 2013, pp. 135–62))? What is the status of collective and collaborative framing processes in connection with selfies'

production of meaning, negotiation and distribution in online portals and social media formats? The tendency to resignify and reiterate existing content (mashup, remix) points to a performative aspect that is an expression of collaborative framing processes that elude subsumtion under any intersubjectively controllable field of discourse. Performative processes on the internet are the result of technological enablement. Specifically, it is the computer-assisted information and communication technologies that regulate the modes, validity and distribution of user-generated content. Based on the finding that performances, staging and rituals gain importance in a performative contemporary culture, it can further be assumed that images in staging and perceiving the subject play an increasingly important role. In this staged procedural field between physical configurations of media—protruding into everyday media practices through smartphones and tablets—and subject designs, individual images mix with collective images, pointing to a cultural dimension of imagery, performativity, and sociality (Gye 2007, pp. 279–88). I will include both intracultural and intercultural visual patterns of staged arrangements of gestures and attitudes in the image that are charged with meaning and shared in collective image spaces. In this respect, I will scrutinize both the performativity within the image and the image itself as a *performative medium*. Still, it has to be taken into account that imagery in computer-based media during this age of digital networking media is to be understood less as something originating from representation than something that can be derived from *pragmatism* and *performativity*. In this respect, my research follows the assumption that the appearance of the new media as such leads to a change in the communicative forms of self-thematization. Against the background of this state of research on digital image culture, I use the pictorial nature of social interactions as a methodological opportunity to combine the genre and discourse analysis of visual cultural techniques with a technologically pragmatic approach. I will ask how the advancement of mobile technology due to wirelessly connected media (smartphones, tablets) and digital distribution media (the internet) influences the aesthetic and practice of visual self-thematization (Vitak 2012, pp. 451–70). After all, cheaper acquisition, simpler handling of visual techniques and facilitated distribution of photographic artifacts on social network sites during the past decade have induced a diagnosis termed as the "pervasive" (Coyne 2010) turn of visual self-thematization. At the same time, I observe how many formats that emerged with the participatory opportunities of the mobile networking community (Castells 1996–1998) have created technological, economic, and socially structural conditions for thematizing subjects in even more distinctly identifiable genres, which could be referred to as a visual culture of self-thematization. I can, however, only acquire a more detailed understanding of this relationship once it becomes clear in what way the visual practice and the aesthetics of photographic self-representation collaborate with the networking culture of the social media. The media-related structures of self-thematization forms

are not only results of technological advancement and individualized forms of communication, but they historically result from technologically based instructions of organizational and governmental forms of sociality (Reichert 2014b), which are currently carried through web-based institutions as well, as will be examined using the methods outlined below.

5. Allegories of Femininity

For centuries, women that correspond to contemporary beauty ideals have been imaged in front of mirrors, perpetuating a visual motif of vanitas allegories. In its moral use, the mirror was always seen negatively in the allegories of sins and connoted "impertinence", "vanity" and "pride", which were linked to the "beauty", "youthfulness" and "self-love" of women. The "complacent self-reflection" outweighed the contemplative function of "reflecting yourself". By linking the vanitas allegory with the mirror motif, a picture of women was designed in which a "vain" self-reference was to reveal itself as a beautiful illusion. Mirror scenes always communicated a normative vanitas idea: the woman looking into the mirror realizes that she cannot save any of her pictures as a medium. This experimental arrangement derives the motif of impermanence from failure to create an enduring image of the woman.

The stereotypes of a typically female connoted media practice used in the media coverage of the so-called "generation selfie" are centered around the figure of the naïve, playing on the iconography of vanitas and the ambiguous symbol of the mirror. This has been done by the fine arts since antiquity and so these stereotypes have been passed on: Not only sciences and arts, ideals of state and virtue, but also ideas of place, space or time have been represented and propagated for centuries in body images—and thus necessarily gender-specific. The "iconologies" of the 16th century have been systematically regulated and the allegorical riddles made available lexically. They archived an arsenal of common personifications. Others have been created. (Schade et al. 1994, p. 3).

Allegory as a literary and visual process has been known since ancient Greece and Rome. The term "allegory" literally means "saying differently" (Latin "alia oratio"; Greek "allos", "different" and "agoreúein", "to say in public") and means an "other" layer of meaning that exists parallel to the literal meaning. In general terms, the allegory can be seen as a sensual or intellectual illustration of an abstract concept. Allegorical visualizations aim at clarity, clarity and plausibility of cultural ideology. Even for Hegel, who regarded allegory as an inadequate form of artistic representation in his theory of aesthetics, allegory therefore consists in general abstract states or properties from the human as well as the natural world—religion, love, justice, discord, fame, war, peace, spring, summer, autumn, winter, death, fama—to be personified and thus to be understood as a subject. (Hegel 1986, p. 388).

A motif-historical image analysis of the symbolically and allegorically arguing self-negotiation reveals mechanisms of the transfer and superimposition of self-images and body images. Popular or popularizing discourses on self-portrayals in the social network seek communication with common image repertoire, recognized body images and typical role models. In *Monuments and Maidens*, Marina Warner writes about the representation of imaginary communality through feminine allegories: The female figure tends to be perceived as general and universal, with symbolic ulterior motives, while the male figure is individual, even if it is used, a generalizing one to express the idea. (Warner 1989, p. 35).

The media discourse on "Generation Selfie" uses stereotypical feminine allegories to manifest the idea of a homogeneous and universal community of young people. The young women not only represent this generation, but also embody it. In this context, it is often pointed out that it is mainly young girls who like to take photos of themselves and then spread these self-images in social networks. In this way, the visibility of young women on the internet is turned into a matter of their self-driven self-expression and ultimately naturalized by transferring their own drive to be exhibitionistic to the phenomenon of selfies. With this negative, derogatory rhetoric, young girls are assumed to have a genuinely feminine enjoyment of their self-portrayal and, as a result, social constraints, norms and expectations of self-publication on the internet are hidden. Both the life-world authorization of individual self-images and the allegorical condemnation of youth cultural image practice misses the face as a privileged place of gender signatures and interpretations. As a competitive location for social and cultural enrollments, however, the face has challenged a variety of de-mediatization practices, which I would like to discuss in the following chapter.

6. Defacement as Media Criticism?

Face images have become omnipresent in the image communication of the digital networking culture. They (Figure 2) can be understood as a contemporary view of the rhetorical figure of *prosopopeia*, with which pictures are given the property of reviving the character of a person and speaking for the individual depicted (Riffaterre 1985, pp. 107–23). In the figure of *prosopopeia* or *fictio personae*, images are staged as speaking or capable of other human behavior. Paul de Man points out that the rhetorical process of *prosopopeia* has a fundamental relationship with the critical reflection of facial representation. Etymologically speaking, the word *prosopopeia* is composed of the Greek *prospon poien* and addresses the performative aspect of masking: giving yourself a mask or putting on a certain face (prosopon).

In the context of biographical self-presentation, the *prosopopeia* procedure revolves around the aspect of the face when it comes to giving a face or losing face. In this tension between showing the face and its impending loss, *prosopopeia*

opens up an aesthetic game "with the giving and the taking away of faces, with face and deface, figure, figuration and disfiguration." (De Man 1984, p. 76) In this sense, the documentary forms of selfies can be described as a technique by means of which something not alive, the picture is given an individual expression of the personal. They therefore designate a visual practice with which individuality is to be conveyed in a fundamental way. The conveyance of individuality takes place in two stages and includes both the content level of the representation and the performative level of the actors who relate to the represented in a relationship of the true, the evident and the legitimate. Their central role in self-thematization in the social media of Web 2.0 has not only established a facial regime of facial recognition, but also started practices of the monitored, i.e., processes of de-mediatization and image-critical facial resolution, with which aesthetic strategies and dominance relationships of visual identity constructions can be addressed.

Figure 2. Anti selfies become part of the criticism of society and capitalism. Source: Pixabay.

The face, this privileged place of significations and interpretations, has provoked countless practices of defacement, and not only since the dawn of the selfie age. The term defacement describes a practice that deals critically and reflexively with the visual dominance of face representations (cf. (Grabher 2019)). In this context, the medialization of the face is also criticized (Butkowski et al. 2019, pp. 385–97). By this I mean that the face does not focus the ontological nature of self-identity. The face is interpreted as a cultural and social construction and in this sense, alternative content of self-portrayal is asked for and alternative options of the facial regime are

sought. Against this background, the term de-medialization has also been used. The concept of de-mediatization claims a perspective on the connection between media, cultural and social change. De-mediatization points to an opposition to social and cultural consequences of this progress, as it is in everyday life, in public discourse and in the form of social movements.

The face cult as such has always evoked figures of facial dissolution, which were regarded as negations of anything figurative, personal and individual. During the 20th century in particular, visual art, photography and film have fostered the aesthetic deconstruction of self-staging as a means of criticizing the face as a social inscription and projection surface: The concept of dissolution, read distinctly with regard to its capacity to eliminate, terminate or revoke the facial regime, may be interpreted as a means of criticising the face and of the generation of meaning that made it an ID card for being human, a stage of emotions in anthropology and the theory of affects, then nothing less than a crime scene in 19th century criminal biology and a piece of evidence in forensics (Körte and Weiss 2013, p. 6). Yet, all of the countless attempts to dissolve the face and make it disappear have always conceded that it has a pivotal role when it comes to negotiating aspects of individuality, personality and character.

Against this background, I would like to pose a question: Are certain counter-images of the selfie culture associated with the genre-specific portrait and the traditional culture of human representation, and if yes, how? I would like to discuss the problem of facial self-thematization using the example of the so-called "sellotape selfies". The much-discussed genre of "sellotape selfies" has fueled a counter-cultural visual practice of over-acting in the field of digital self-representation. The aesthetic basic materials for "sellotape selfies" include a piece of adhesive tape and an obliging volunteer who allows his face to be wrapped in said adhesive tape. In their distribution as Internet memes (such as via Facebook nominations), they are accredited effective reflection of the facial society in terms of visual culture. Media faces are neither neutral nor innocent, because they can be used to stabilize and legitimize power—ranging from the facial staging of personal rule up to the authentication of certain products in the maxim of advertising aesthetics.

The "sellotape selfies" remind us of the historical discomfort of art regarding the depiction of "truth" and "singularity" in a portrait. In 1948, Francis Bacon painted the first and rather monstrous anti-portrait of his "Heads" series ("Head I-VI, 1948"). By blurring the head and the face as well as the head and the space surrounding it, he wanted to dissolve identifiable checkpoints to create a deconstruction of the face as a surface of the subject. Later, in 1966, Gerhard Richter ("Selbstporträt") mutilated himself with adhesive tape over his face, thus anticipating all subsequent sellotape interventions. The figure of dismantling may signify in this context that the adhesive tape means not so much an additional way of masking but rather a process of unmasking used to interpret the natural face not as something originally naked

but as a mask itself. Accordingly, the face can be regarded as an icon proper to the signifying regime, which has to be disfigured and turned monstrous by the artist to point out the fabricated character of the seemingly "natural" facial expression.

The adhesive tape can be used to "dismantle" the face as a medium, as an enablement of self-expression in order to signify a de-mediatization of the face as a conventional bearer of signs. This kind of practice of de-mediatization wants to provoke a discussion on the unreflecting use of the medium "face" as a social sculpture. The key momentum of this artistic practice is not so much the moral outrage over the ugliness of what is shown. Instead, "sellotape selfies" experiment with elements of deprivation such as self-assurance, self-identification and narcissism. Al Hansen ("Sharing Piece", 1970) and Douglas Gordon ("Monster", 1997) are other artists who have subsequently attempted to disfigure their faces using adhesive tape and use their portrait-based artistic interventions to protest against beauty standards, police records logics and political exploitation.

The act of dissolution of the face's image on social media introduces ambiguities and uncertainties into the everyday practice of the selfie and the facial regime. The everyday communication using the face is liberated from its taken-for-grantedness and the practices of defacement initiate thinking about the face's status in today's media society. The main focus, in this context, should therefore lie on processes and embodiments based on which dimensions of "faces in dissolution" in terms of perceptive aesthetics and media disposition can be differentiated. In this context, "dissolution", as a factor relating to aesthetics, *aisthesis* and mediality alike, implies a whole bundle of techniques, touching, as a relational expression, on media boundary objects such as the staging of hard focus versus soft focus, proximity versus depth, visibility versus invisibility. Dissolution has thus not only to do with the disappearance of the face but also with alternative techniques of making it visible. The de-mediatization of the face has numerous degrees of separation and must by no means be generally equated with the refusal, deletion or revocation of the face. Instead, the strategies of defacement operate with a plurality of shifts and overlays, which allow a different perspective on the face's fabricated character. In this respect, dissolution points to certain techniques of creating an image or of designing an image in a different manner in order to express alternative ways of designing and perceiving subjectivity. In this context, the "sellotape selfies" are still circling around the iconic primer of the classical portrait, based—despite all the self-staging of disfigured monstrosity—on a visual resemblance between the image and the object it represents. On the other hand, one might consider practices of de-mediatization that do not so much shift the core substance of the subject but try to grasp the subject from its periphery. For example, users of the photo sharing website Pinterest can pin collections of pictures including descriptions on virtual walls and propagate

sequences of images that compartmentalize the subject into endless attributes without generating a meaningful center.

7. Media Practices of Creating Anonymity

Practices of creating anonymity are widely common on online platforms, where they confront the physiognomic code with its own withdrawal, absence or disappearance. The transition (Figure 3) from the face to its possible evaporation and imagelessness can be shown based on numerous exemplary practices of creating visual anonymity. I would like to use the following example to demonstrate that the visual strategies for the dissolution of self-representation always oscillate between the poles of removal and affiliation, between reversing and recreating anonymity.

Figure 3. Image strategies of anonymization are based on the stereotypical use of known images. Source: Pixabay.

In reference to the German model casting show "Germany's Next Topmodel", the visual filler text "Unfortunately, I don't have a photo for you today" points to the selective mechanisms of visual self-representation. What seems to me the most relevant observation in this context is that the imagelessness in the social web that attempts to win users a minimum of substance, privacy and opacity at least indirectly, must not be equated with a radical act of de-personalization in that practices of creating anonymity always include instances of addressed communication that are also partly inherent to the images themselves. Even those images that are used to create anonymity, addressing the face as a formation of action including identification,

assessment and evaluation, participate in a collective stock of images and refer to mutually shared negotiation processes, controversies and demarcations.

8. Conclusions

Strategies of facial dissolution may be identified as "resistance" against procedures of personal registration and identification on online platforms and social network sites. It still remains open in this context whether "old action programs and settings" will be reintroduced along with these practices of facial dissolution. First of all, I was looking at the homogenizing dichotomy of "old" versus "new" and ask whether facial dissolutions correspond to tendencies of de-mediatization making recourse to "old", "overcome" or "defensive" action. In the case of the defacement of personal profile pictures that operate with the withdrawal, the fragility and the inconsistency of the digital countenance, a pure dichotomy between new and old image-related action on the part of the agents involved cannot be established for the following reasons:

1. The types of deconstruction of the facial appearance of profile pictures I have addressed by way of example in my analysis aim at representation within the formal specifications of digital action programs. They address inter-subjectivity via visual media, thus more or less blanking out the computer in its capacity as a computing medium. In this respect, my examples of visual de-mediatization are primarily meant as socially conveyed forms of self-thematization-images. While aestheticizing practices of facial dissolution reflect the place of facial representation as a venue of recognition and identification procedures, they are unable to fundamentally change the media dispositive for creating biometrical features and facial semantization.

2. The practices of de-mediatization I have addressed in my analysis can be counted as a gain in distinction when users use their strategies of creating anonymity to build up their image. Accordingly, instances of de-mediatization of the subject constitute a prerequisite for instances of reflecting re-mediatization users use to communicate their criticism of their own "datafication".

The examples of the dissolution of visual cultural patterns of self-thematization oscillate between instances of de-mediatization and those of re-mediatization. They are configured to break with certain conventions and constellations of self-representation on the one hand and to build compatible boundary objects on the other. These boundary objects of de-mediatization can be compatible with heterogeneous interest groups and constitute a low threshold for entry to various kinds of communication and action contexts.

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