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Marija Selak

Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Zagreb

Self(ie)

Abstract:

In this paper, the mode in which the self reveals itself in the contemporary world-historical situation will be analysed. Hence, the focus will be on a particular form of technological mediation of the self by examining a recent phenomenon commonly referred to as the selfie. Unlike most psychological studies suggest, it will be argued that selfies enable a human epistemological need to realize self-knowledge. Thus, they are not a mere result of narcissistic disorder. Furthermore, I will claim that the self-knowledge achieved via the selfie does not necessarily offer a lower level of aesthetic perfection as a means of self-knowledge gained via other “classical” art forms, and that the prejudice that this is the case is a result of a surpassed dualistic view of human nature. In the conclusion of the paper the investigation will be extended to the question of what the selfie can teach us about the essence of (modern) technology and, inversely, what from (modern) technology we can tell about the (modern) self. In doing so, Gehlen’s and Heidegger’s views on the essence of technology will be employed. Finally, to answer the question of whether the self can be revealed in the selfie, Heidegger’s criticism of modern technology will be emphasized and the difference between technology as a way of revealing and technology as a purpose will be underlined.

Key words:

Self, Selfie, Technology, Arnold Gehlen, Martin Heidegger

Introduction. The Age of the Selfie

“As far as the individual is concerned, each individual is in any case a child of his time; thus philosophy, too, is its own time comprehended in thoughts. It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world, as that an individual can overleap his own time or leap over Rhodes”.¹ This famous statement of Hegel’s *Preface to the Philosophy of Right* summarizes his work’s mode of philosophizing through history and reveals the essence of his dialectics. Inspired by Hegel’s thought, in this paper the process of the externalisation of the self and its consequences will be investigated from the perspective of the historical situation of the contemporary world, in which the self is mediated by technology and reveals itself in the selfie.

As the art critic Jerry Saltz has commented, “We live in the age of the selfie. A fast self-portrait, made with a smartphone’s camera and immediately distributed and inscribed into a network, is an instant visual communication of where we are, what we’re doing, who we think we are, and who we think is watching.”²

Indeed, today everybody is engaging in photography, and everybody is an object for photography. We are even taking photos of objects in the museums which by their definition are already captured as art – made permanent. We want to document not just every thing, but also every action, trying to imprison it in order to make it everlasting.³ As we all know, while traveling and discovering new, unknown places we are focusing more on the fixation of the self on a photo (“Stand still and let me take the photo”!) which will remain as a memory and less on the action itself.

The reactions on the self we manage to “capture” on a selfie are often ambivalent. They range from “O my God, I look so stupid!” to “Look how good I look in this photo, my own mother wouldn’t recognise me!”⁴ Indeed, one can think that in a selfie, he looks more or less like himself, but the one that will be the judge of that is not necessarily the author of the selfie. That is due to the fact that the phenomenon of the selfie is not self-sufficient. On the contrary, taking a selfie is an action that insists upon a reaction.

Luigi Pirandello in his last novel *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand* tells a story about Vitangelo Moscarda who experiences an identity crisis when he realises that others perceive him differently than he perceives himself, and that there are actually one hundred thousand of him. In this novel Pirandello shows that identity depends on an acknowledgment of others. Hence, the self can be interpreted as an imaginary creation, a result of a struggle for mutual recognition.⁵

Similarly, the selfie asserts a particular disposition towards the view that the self is communicative: “selfies are, on face, about the self, yet they long for – require, even – sharing to be considered ‘true’ selfies”⁶. That means there are two possibilities: 1) either the “inner” self doesn’t exist prior to its outside appearance in the selfie where self is created in communication with others (following their reactions), hence self is perfor-

1) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21–22.

2) Jerry Saltz: “Art at Arm’s Length: A History of the Selfie”, *The New York Magazine*, February 3, 2014, available at: <http://www.vulture.com/2014/01/history-of-the-selfie.html>. (accessed 5 May 2017)

3) Even more, documentation becomes an art form, as Boris Groys warns in his famous essay “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation”, available at: http://www.ranadasgupta.com/notes.asp?note_id=34 (17 June 2017), trans. Steven Lindberg.

4) Compare with Marija Selak: “Majmuni i majmunisanje” (Monkeys and Acting Like Monkeys), *H-alter*, January 18, 2016, available at: <http://www.h-alter.org/vijesti/majmuni-i-majmunisanje>.

5) Luigi Pirandello, *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, trans. William Weaver (Boston: Eridanos Press, 1990).

6) Aaron Hess: “The Selfie Assemblage”, *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015): 1629–1646, 1631.

mative⁷ or 2) an “inner” self does exist and it can never be captured, externalised and objectified completely, which is the reason why we never stop at taking just one selfie.⁸

If we explore the phenomenon of the selfie further, one claim appears more often than the others and that is that the selfie is a symptom of narcissism.⁹ Hence to discover the nature of a selfie, one must ask if the selfie is an expression of narcissism, a “disorder” of contemporary society, often used as a distinct manifestation of modern ‘individualism’, or whether it reveals some constitutive human needs?

Technology as a (Mis)representer of the Self?

Arnold Gehlen, one of the representatives (together with Helmuth Plessner and Max Scheler) of the modern paradigm of German Philosophical Anthropology,¹⁰ suggests that human beings are not best suited to any kind of natural environment owing to the lack of specialized organs and instincts,¹¹ so they intelligently change their surroundings. Gehlen sees the life functions of human beings in central areas of their nature (heart beat and breathing) as *automatism*, hence the motivation for objectification of the work, for the reification, comes from our nature.¹² Human beings recognize themselves in the rational – spiritual and material – product they create. This is what Arnold Gehlen calls a *phenomenon of resonance*.¹³ To be able to understand ourselves, according to Gehlen, we must transgress ourselves and transform the environment to the coordinates we understand, according to some kind of automatism.¹⁴ We “translate” ourselves in order to comprehend our natural “pattern”. The result of this translation is a technological product. This means that machines we produce are actually materialised mechanisms of our own nature. Therefore, the technology serves us as a compensation for our natural deficiencies and it has an epistemological purpose.¹⁵ We make and use the machines to find out who we really are.

In Gehlen’s case this epistemological purpose of technology is primarily anthropological (technology is there to enable human self-knowledge), but there are also different ways in which one could understand its function. Heidegger, as the philosopher best known for his criticism of Western metaphysics as the oblivion of the being, claimed that revealing the essence of technology enables the cognition of being.¹⁶

7) Ibid., 1632.

8) Although one can distinguish these two positions, this doesn’t mean that certain positions do not mediate between these two possibilities, for example Hegel’s view on the self in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. However, in this type of “mediated position” we can still distinguish these two possibilities.

9) See for example: P. Sorokowska, A. Sorokowska, A. Oleszkiewicz, T. Frackowiaka, A. Huka, K. Pisanska: “Selfie posting behaviours are associated with narcissism among men”, *Personality and Individual Differences*, Volume 85 (October 2015):123–127, or Eric B. Weiser: “#Me: Narcissism and its facets as predictors of selfie-posting frequency”, *Personality and Individual Differences*, Volume 86 (November 2015): 477–481, or Daniel Halperna, Sebastián Valenzuela, James E. Katz: “‘Selfie-ists’ or ‘Narci-selfiers’?: A cross-lagged panel analysis of selfie taking and narcissism”, *Personality and Individual Differences*, Volume 97 (July 2016): 98–101.

10) Joachim Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen”, *Iris* (1 April 2009): 153–170.

11) Gehlen develops his philosophical anthropology by contrasting human beings and animals. Animals, compared to human beings, have more developed instincts and organs that enable them to adjust to the environment and to survive in the nature (e.g. they can hear better, they have fur etc.).

12) Arnold Gehlen, *Man in the Age of Technology*, trans. Patricia Lipscomb (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980): 100.

13) Ibid., p. 99.

14) Ibid.

15) Compare with Fabio Grigenti: “Arnold Gehlen – Inadequacy and Technology”, in: *Existence and Machine. The German Philosophy in the Age of Machines (1870–1960)* (Springer International Publishing, 2016), pp. 47–54.

16) Marija Selak, *Ljudska priroda i nova epoha* (Human nature and New epoch), (Zagreb: Naklada Breza, 2013), chapter II. 2.

Heidegger states that the essence of technology itself is by no means anything technological. He considers instrumental and anthropological understandings of technology insufficient. They are correct but they don't fundamentally reveal the essence of technology. "If we inquire what technology represented as means actually is, then we shall arrive at revealing. The possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing", says Heidegger. "Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth."¹⁷

Technology is a way of revealing; hence it has an epistemological purpose. This is what both Gehlen and Heidegger agree on. If we apply their understanding of the epistemological purpose of technology to the phenomenon of the selfie, what is usually misunderstood as narcissism can be interpreted as an attempt at self-reflection. Since human beings are beings of compensation (Gehlen),¹⁸ in order to comprehend themselves, they must objectify themselves. And this is exactly the process of taking a selfie. Hence, the selfie cannot be considered to be merely a product of the consumer society, and therefore discarded as something banal and superficial. The so-called "narcissism" involved is more appropriately defined as a way we are mediating ourselves through technology in order to see who we are. We are just doing the same thing we do in our inner dialogues all the time – that is, reflect about ourselves and our actions. The only difference is that in the selfie this process becomes visible.

What about this difference? Can the self be expressed in something such as a photo? Can this deep, vague, mystical substance (or even a non-substance) be "captured" so easily? Does the self-knowledge that can be achieved via a selfie really have a lower level of perfection than the self-knowledge gained via other classical means? Why do we tend to think that if one writes a poem about his condition, he is a sensitive and introspective searcher for the self, yet if one takes a photo of himself, he is a shallow, self-centred individual that doesn't even try to discover who he really is? The perception that this is the case follows a long tradition, starting from orphic teaching about mystical dualism between soul and body, which achieved classical articulation in Plato's thought, along with Plotinus later claiming that matter is the greatest evil,¹⁹ through the scholastic philosophical-theological tradition, all the way to Descartes who stands at the beginning of modern Western philosophy.²⁰ Following that dualistic line, we tend to think that something that reflects our outside appearance stands on a lower level, further from the good as Plotinus would say, than something that reflects our inside. Thus, the tendency has arisen to possess prejudices against photography for these reasons. Contrary to that, the selfie represents a mindset that discards this dualistic picture of the subject-object divide, by allowing one to become a subject and an object of the action at the same time – the one who is taking the photo and the model. Since this was enabled by the modern technology, which serves as the mediator between the self and the selfie,

17) Martin Heidegger: "The Question Concerning Technology", in: Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (NewYork/London: Garland Publishing, 1977), 12.

18) Human beings "suffer" from the lack of specialized organs and instincts that could help them to adjust to the environment. Therefore, in order to survive, they must find a way to compensate for their lack. This is why they are creating technology, language and institutions. Consequently, this "insufficiency" is seen as a positive quality because it enables the creation of humane world of culture.

19) Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, The First Ennead, Eighth Tractate: "On the Nature and Source of Evil", available at: http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0204-0270,_Plotinus,_The_Six_Enneads,_EN.pdf (accessed 15 June 2017), translated by Stephen Mackenna and B. S. Page, 203–204. This, of course, does not mean that the matter is the absence of being. Plotinus, in accordance with the privation theory, argued that the matter is the furthest from the source of being: "By this Non-Being, of course, we are not to understand something that simply does not exist, but only something of an utterly different order from Authentic-Being: there is no question here of movement or position with regard to Being; the Non-Being we are thinking of is, rather, an image of Being or perhaps something still further removed than even an image" (Ibid., 201).

20) Alison M. Jaggar, Karsten J. Struhl: "Human nature", in: Stephen G. Post (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Bioethics*, II (USA: Macmillan Reference, 2004): 1209–1221.

in order to understand the consequences of this “technological mediation” of the self, we should come back to the question of what is the essence of modern technology. In this respect, Heidegger warns that:

as soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but does so, rather, exclusively as *standing-reserve* and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve.²¹

What does that mean? Modern technology allows human beings to come closer to self-knowledge than ever, it is a way of revealing after all, and now it is available to everybody, but at the same time it is also, by its revealing nature, as Heidegger alerts us, narrowing us down to what can be revealed because the principle of reduction is the one that makes this objectification possible.

Modern science’s way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces. Modern physics is not experimental physics because it applies apparatus to the questioning of nature. Rather the reverse is true. Because physics, indeed already as pure theory, sets nature up to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance, it therefore orders its experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature reports itself when set up in this way.²²

Correspondingly, technological apparatus as an epistemological “device” are used with the assumption that something must be comprehensible. In order to be comprehensible within the subject-object framework, the thing needs to be subdued, subordinated. To explain how the subordinating principle of modern technology works, Heidegger uses the example of the forester who measures the felled timber: “To all appearances (he) walks the same forest path in the same way as did his grandfather, but today he is commanded by profit-making in the lumber industry, whether he knows it or not. He is made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper, which is then delivered to newspapers and illustrated magazines.”²³

Concluding remarks.

The difference between technology as a way of revealing and technology as a purpose

Technology understood as a way of revealing, can help to reveal what the self is. Hence, we can’t narrow down the phenomenon of the selfie to an expression of mere narcissism. However, the modern technology is no longer being a mere mediator, transferring or imitating the self, rather the reverse is true that the self is imitating technological devices: we are trying to “capture” ourselves appointing the objectified self-produced self as the only, or at least the main, self we are communicating with others.

Furthermore, although the selfie conceptualized the self as communicative by revealing its performative nature, via selfie we are entering the creative procedure of *inventing* the self, which means that we don’t share with others our “caught by surprise” natural appearance, but rely on our abilities to modify ourselves according to certain beauty standards in order to be as acceptable as possible to others. Thus, as Hess states,

21) Ibid.: 26–27.

22) Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”, 21.

23) Ibid., 18.

the selfie “displays the uncertainty and fragmentation of self in contemporary societies, including the many desires and burdens of body-image politics”.²⁴

From pop stars to common people using social networks, the world is obsessed with the desire for rewriting our natural human determination – we are trying to adjust our image to fit the ideal framework. By choosing a certain angle of shooting or with the help of image enhancement, our body image can be seriously reinvented.²⁵

A difficulty which arises from this process of the self-creation in the selfie relates to the consequences of the technological creation of the illusion of an absolute liberation. The trick lies in the fact that this “invention” of the self in the selfie is not unrestrained, allowing the self to be(come) anything, meaning something unexpected. It is limited by the media that reveals it – some kind of technological device. Even the space of the visual is reduced, depending on the limits and capacities of the latest technological devices. Although these restraints exist, we are often unaware of them and we allow technology to “filter” us. Thus, the deception that we can make (almost) anything of ourselves remains. Even more, the modern technology enabled its spreading because of its capacity as a tool of self-creation, the possibility to play with the self-image and to make it permanent, once possessed only by chosen artists who were able to create an auto portrait, now belongs to everyone.

Jerry Saltz suggests that “selfies have changed aspects of social interaction, body language, self-awareness, privacy, and humour, altering temporality, irony, and public behaviour. It’s become a new visual genre – a type of self-portraiture formally distinct from all others in history. Selfies have their own structural autonomy. This is a very big deal for art”.²⁶ Art is now “at arm’s length”.²⁷ Heidegger also reminds us that the “essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art.”²⁸

Today, when we speak about technology we usually refer to the instrumental role of technology, where technology doesn’t belong to the realm of the poietic any more. By becoming a collective, unskilful tool, it avoids revealing the unknown, the being, which would be its role according to Heidegger, and narrows down to an attempt of revealing itself (automatism) in the human being as Gehlen emphasized. This means that technology doesn’t reveal the essence of human beings, it reveals only, as Heidegger puts it, a “coherence of forces calculable in advance”. Although the selfie has an epistemological purpose, at the same time it makes a moment, a piece of the self, eternal, absolute, and in that respect, it is also *m i s t a k i n g* it for what is *t r u e*. This is what Heidegger meant by the danger of modern technology.

To conclude, in this paper it was argued that, following Heidegger’s critique of modern technology, there is more in human beings than they can technologically produce. Heidegger offered an “escape” from being-as technology by opening the window to the field of art, and finished his *The Question Concerning Technology* with the statement, “Questioning is the piety of thought”.²⁹ But is there more in human beings than they can imagine? This question about the nature of an imagination, as a metaphor of an artistic contribution to the comprehension of human beings, actually asks; is the window of the art the last window that needs to be opened?

24) Aaron Hess: “The Selfie Assemblage”, *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015): 1629–1646.

25) It is worth of mentioning that with selfies this rewriting is only cosmetic: we use a better angle of shooting or an interesting tropical background. But, with the help of techno-science, as the idea of human enhancement suggests, this rewriting will very soon imply some more concrete interventions in our biology. Compare with: “Majmuni i majmunisanje” (Monkeys and Acting Like Monkeys)

26) Jerry Saltz: “Art at Arm’s Length: A History of the Selfie”, *The New York Magazine*, February 3, 2014, available at: <http://www.vulture.com/2014/01/history-of-the-selfie.html>. (Accessed 5 May 2017)

27) Ibid.

28) Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”, 35.

29) Ibid.