

# THE ESTRANGEMENT OF OTHER'S GAZE IN THE SELFIE ERA

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“I am not me nor am I the other / I am something in between: / Pillar of the bridge of boredom / That goes from me to the Other” (our translation), describes the Portuguese poet Mário de Sá-Carneiro. In the four verses of the epigraph poem entitled 7, the author manages to evoke the complexity of the relationship between the Self and the Other, both interconnected by an ambivalence: they coexist as part of the same system – complementary and opposite – which, to function, requires an intermediary, something that can overcome the large tedious structure that often appears on the horizon of life, creating this possibility of connection that makes the Self see itself in equalities and differences in front of the mirror that is the Other.

The verses emerged from memory when I tried to put into words an issue that I have noticed as a photographer when taking portraits: the discomfort faced by the Other's gaze. To exemplify the starting point that provoked me to write this reflection, next I describe the episode that instigated a strangeness that, at the time, I could not quite understand the reason for.

Preceded by the classic phrase “I'll take advantage of the fact that you're a photographer”, a colleague asked me to take some photos of her, with her smartphone, on an informal late afternoon outing. I looked for the best framing, said something stupid to make her smile, and clicked the camera shutter a few times.



From my point of view, the result was satisfactory. However, she didn't like what she saw, and I know this because she took advantage of the scenery and the golden hour of the late afternoon, clicked on the front camera, and took some selfies, with the same expression she always has in all her other selfies. Later, upon arriving home, I saw that she posted one of them on Instagram, with editing and overlaying filters that erased all the pores and expression lines.

I started to notice that similar situations continued to happen, even when I was using professional equipment: some people, especially younger ones, don't like seeing themselves photographed in my portraits, considering them "from too close". The recurrence made me raise two initial hypotheses:

- 1) Maybe I wasn't such a good photographer.
- 2) Maybe people didn't like seeing themselves in photographs.

I showed the rejected portraits to some friends, some of them being photography professionals and others, laypeople, and asked what they thought. They said the clicks were great, they pointed out this or that adjustment that could have been made, but nothing that would harm the result of the image. I also heard: "the person looks beautiful in the photo, what problem do they see?". It was the same question I asked myself.

Having discarded the first hypothesis, I investigated the second: no, they had no problem seeing themselves portrayed in photographs. One of the subjects – who, when asked why she didn't like the photos, claimed to have self-esteem problems and didn't like seeing herself – posts selfies quite frequently, including in swimwear. The colleague in the story above also had no problem being photographed – she displayed hundreds of portraits on social media.

From this spontaneous investigation came the third clue: these people who did not recognize themselves as beautiful or presentable in the portraits I made of them had one thing in common: selfies. They only feel well represented by images made by themselves. Connecting the dots, or rather, the pixels of the selfies, I began to reflect on the destitution of the Other's gaze in the selfie era.

The photographic act of a classic portrait was marked by a dynamic game: photographer and photographed, mediated by the camera, established a relationship of double exchange. Seeing and being seen were intertwined in the process. These same portraits could circulate through a few hands, creating the affective circuits of family albums. These portraits were



an intermediary that established relationships between the Self and the Other.

With the transformation caused by mobile devices connected to the internet and equipped with a camera, there was an important reconfiguration of the photographic act: it became possible to photograph, edit and share photographs on a single device. It was in this context, marked by the intensification of consumer society and the emergence of social networks, that a new model of portrait photography became popular: the selfie, a term that designates a self-portrait taken with a mobile device to be shared on a social network through the internet.


If self-portraits have always existed, since before photography, the possibility of self-representation was not new, but social networks established a new dynamic, where these self-portraits became media, displayed to a virtual audience in exchange for likes, establishing what Paula Sibilia (2008) called it a “show of the Self”, marked by a mediatic and fictionalized daily life to be performed on social networks.

The author highlights that the Self “that speaks and shows itself tirelessly on the web is usually triple: it is at the same time author, narrator and character” (Sibilia 2008, 31, our translation). In this way, the portrait becomes self-centered on a single character: a Self that, in Sibilia’s (2008) assessment, is always fragile, as it is based only on visual self-evidence, disregarding the subjective complexity of the layers of human existence and the photographic image.

This self-centering of the author, narrator and character in the Self, which is motivated by an “alter-directed subjectivity” (Sibilia 2008, 111), is aligned with the changes caused by the tightening of the bourgeois social code, the exacerbation of capitalism and the self-exploitation of the subject in a society of consumption.

As Annateresa Fabris (2004) emphasizes, portrait photography, before being a record of individuals, is a mark of society and the historical time in which it is produced. By changing social codes and current imagination, portrait photography underwent a significant reconfiguration. The portrait has always been a form of social representation governed by the bourgeois code, in a process led by the photographer, who had the technical knowledge to control the photographic act.

Now, with mobile devices equipped with cameras, the individual not only becomes the subject of the photograph, but also its own producer and curator, exercising total control over its representation. This self-centrality reflects not only a change in photographic practices, but also a



transformation in the perception of identity and self-image, in which the search for social validation and the construction of a personal narrative become central elements.

In this scenario of a spectacular daily life, where life is formatted to appear on screens, the camera obscura records are governed by a new regime, which I called photo-ostentation (Oliveira 2018). In this paradigm marked by public exhibition, the photographic act seems to be governed by the dismissal of the Other's gaze. The Self, in front of the camera, creates images that it considers ideal, to a currency for exchanging likes.

While the photo-document is intended to be substantive, that is, a certificate that something happened or someone existed, the photo-ostentation is adjective, seeking to add value to the subject. [...] The photo-ostentation reconfigures the experience, as the photo itself becomes the experience (Oliveira 2018, 334).

And if photography is always a performance, marked by the theatricalization of poses and the repetition of social clichés, with the self-centered performance of the selfie, the participation of the Other is limited to the condition of spectator, who at no time should cast critical or disapproving glances, but, rather, likes and positive comments that reinforce the image performed, characteristic of a media narcissism that governs many of the interactional practices of social networks on the internet.

In the work *Narcisismo: negação do verdadeiro self*, Alexandre Lowen (1993) comments that more than an individual condition, narcissism has become a cultural movement, marked by the devaluation of human needs, including physiological ones, to value idealizations such as consumption, power and fame. Life and culture begin to be governed and formatted to meet this ideal, which is false, unattainable and foolish, as it is based on an unreality that the author classifies as neurotic, bordering on psychosis.

Historian and social critic Christopher Lasch (1983) reinforces the thesis that narcissism is part of the *modus operandi* of a media-driven society formatted for consumption. He considers that “prevailing social conditions tend, as a result, to bring out the narcissistic traits present, to varying degrees, in all of us” (Lasch 1983, 76, our translation). In this scenario of mirrors and screens, the Self engages in a tireless search for self-approval, which depends on the recognition and acclaim of the Other, who must be a validator. In this sense, criticism and dialogue give way to reiteration and monologue.

Lowen points out that it's a sign of our culture's narcissistic tendency that people have become super involved with their images. That is why it is

necessary to look away from the Other, because the “[...] need to project and maintain an image forces the person to prevent any feeling that conflicts with the image from reaching consciousness” (Lowen 1993, 53, our translation). The Other can only be part of it if it is to corroborate the idealization of the image, validating it. Because, according to the author, the image is “a way of ensuring acceptance by others, a way of seducing them and gaining power over them” (Lowen 1993, 75, our translation).

The photographic act of the selfie is marked by a feeling of control and ownership of one’s own image. It is in this sense that the Other’s gaze becomes disturbing, as it shows the Self a version that is outside of self-centered idealization. The Other starts to appear with just one eye on the virtual audience, which must approve and appreciate who I am. It can no longer be a scrutinizing gaze, which observes me and has control of the camera – this God-Eye that transfigures the body into an image.

That’s why the Other’s control over my own image is uncomfortable, because it challenges idealization, presenting other possible images. An angle other than mine. A framework other than mine. A point of view other than mine. The Other’s gaze challenges Narcissus to leave the lake’s edge and face the reality around him. Which is not as perfect as idealization, but it is palpable and manages to alleviate the void caused by the projection of the surface image.

With the removal of the “intermediate thing”, in the case of the photographic act the possibility of the Other’s gaze, the Self crumbles, becomes a blur, even if it is a clear selfie taken by a high-end smartphone. In this context, photography loses its ability to appeal, whether it is mnemonic, affective, aesthetic or documentary, not because any ontological change has occurred, but because the eyes, taken by narcissistic torpor, tirelessly search for a Self that disappears when they stop looking at the possibilities of many Others.

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## ABSTRACT

The text addresses the change in the dynamics of photographic portraiture with the emergence and popularization of selfies on social media. The author, upon noticing the discomfort of some clients and friends facing their own portraits, reflects on how the practice of the selfie has transformed photography into a more self-centered and idealized act. The text argues that narcissism in contemporary culture contributes to this change, emphasizing the control of the Self over one's own image to avoid the critical gaze of the Other. The reflection suggests that this removal of the Other's gaze obscures the enriching possibilities offered by diverse points of view.s

### KEYWORDS:

Photographic  
portraiture; Selfie;  
Narcissism;  
Show of the Self;  
Self-centering.

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