Introduction
Be Your Selfie: Identity, Aesthetics and Power in Digital Self-Representation

DR LAURA BUSETTA, *Sapienza University of Rome*

and

DR VALERIO COLADONATO, *Sapienza University of Rome*

This issue of *Networking Knowledge* investigates the practice of the "selfie", one of the most significant phenomena in the current mediascape. Selfies are a notable example of how the interaction between social networking and recent forms of visual self-representation is reshaping traditional notions such as subjectivity, privacy, and celebrity, among others. As part of the contemporary diffusion of amateur visual culture via personal devices – among which, mobile integrated cameras are arguably the most relevant – selfies contribute to the global circulation of personal images. Their popularity can be related to other trends dating back to the last decades of the twentieth century, such as the rise of artists and photographers who focused their work mostly on self-portraiture. As far as amateur production is concerned, personal images used to circulate among the relatively homogeneous community of the author's (digital) friends in social networking websites, but since selfies have turned into an object of global public consumption, the ideological mechanisms of celebrity culture have been activated. Thus, selfies have also become a recognizable item in the self-branding activities carried out by public figures: they are a well-integrated part of the media strategy of political leaders and entertainment personalities.

This issue aims to contribute to the analysis of such phenomena by adopting two different, yet auxiliary, perspectives: on one hand, the debate on self-representation developed in the tradition of visual studies, and in relation to the history of the arts and photography; on the other hand, an approach based on cultural studies, which aims to highlight how power relations and socially sanctioned forms of "identity" are inscribed in the production and circulation of selfies.

Within this framework, the papers collected here focus on very diverse case studies, and adopt a number of methodological lenses. In bringing together these contributions, our intention is to show that, although selfies share certain common traits – such as the reliance on digital images and the circulation on social media platforms – their uses and functions can significantly diverge. The articles share a double focus, tackling both the novelty of this mediatic tendency, and the long-term aesthetic and cultural traditions in which it operates: they shed some light on specific aspects of selfies while, at the same, providing for each case a broader framework – namely, the aesthetics of personal photography; the role of self-portraiture in conceptual art; the ongoing transformations in political communication; the star system's role in social distinction; self-representation in contemporary Chinese art and visual culture; and (post-)feminist debates on the body's disciplining or liberation.

The first two papers see selfies in continuity with the tradition of self-representation in history of art and photography; by doing so, they also look at the implications of technological innovations, such as the ease of sharing personal images online, and the act of tagging and localizing. In "Art of the Masses: From Kodak Brownie to Instagram", Alise Tifentale considers selfies in relation to the developments of photographic technologies, drawing a comparison between the 1900 Kodak Brownie camera and the rise of amateur photography on the one hand, and the contemporary photographic device she calls "networked camera" on the other; the latter is

explained as a hybrid consisting of a smartphone with an integrated camera, a wireless internet connection, and the related image-sharing platforms and social media. The article also draws on digital humanities and software studies, focusing on the research project *Selfiecity*, conceived as an observatory of images posted from five global cities in the world.

In "About the Anti-Figurativeness of #selfie. (Location of #selfie)", Giacomo Di Foggia relates selfies to the practice of self-representation in conceptual art. The article puts the emphasis on the context in which selfies are taken, and the online and social environment in which they are shared: both elements seem to be more important than the subjects represented in the images. It is in this perspective that the hashtag "#" assumes a crucial role, as it indicates the act of tagging and localizing the subject. The philosophical concept of the "impersonal" is one of the keys through which the essay investigates selfies: they are to be intended as personal images that, once uploaded to one or more social networks, lose their figurative nature, and become traces and legacies of a passage, in a process of anonymity and online impersonality.

The third and fourth articles both discuss the public relevance of selfies whose authors already have relevant exposure on global media, as in the case of politicians, film stars and, more generally, entertainment personalities. The traits characterizing the established *persona* of celebrities who engage in selfies might be altered or reinforced by the amateur-like quality of this form of self-representation. In their paper entitled "Hybrid Content Analysis of the Most Popular Politicians' Selfies on Twitter", Manolo Farci and Mario Orefice discuss a trend that clearly illustrates the current celebrification of politics. The authors argue that a key function performed by selfies consists in giving us a sense of continuity between a politician's public role and his/her personal life — an operation which also provides a symbolic bridge between politics and society. The paper takes into account a series of relevant codes (such as the politician's look and clothing, the presence of other people in the snapshot, the distance from the camera, etc.) in order to observe how selfies reinstate, confirm, or manipulate the expectations with regard to the politician's public role. A key aspect highlighted by this analysis is the "framing effect" produced by selfies, which stems from the combination of the context in which these photographs are taken and the textual elements that accompany them.

Ellen Wright's paper "Watch the Birdie: The Star Economy, Social Media and The Celebrity Group Selfie" elaborates on the equally complex mechanisms at play in the production and circulation of selfies by film stars or, more generally, celebrities. The two case studies from which the author takes cue are the famous Ellen DeGeneres "Oscar" selfie, and the much less successful snapshot by Joan Collins at the 2014 Prince's Trust Awards. The different reactions to these two selfies are explained by the game of cultural distinctions and the hierarchies of taste and cultural capital in which celebrities' images are involved. Stars and fans are equally concerned with the commodity value and social prestige that derive from celebrity status, and taking part in or sharing a celebrity group selfie is a self-promotional act that enables different forms of access to the star system's "pantheon of gods".

The last two contributions to this issue share an ethnographic interest in selfies, which leads to an extended discussion of how context informs the meanings and affects of these images, as well as their aesthetics. With an approach based on both creative practice and media anthropological observation, the article "The Aesthetics of Z*ipai*: From WeChat Selfies to Self-Representation in Contemporary Chinese Art and Photography" by Gabriele de Seta and Michelle Proksell examines a specific use of the selfie (known as *zipai*) in mainland China, providing an insight into Chinese popular culture. The essay investigates the forms of self-representation by users of WeChat, the mobile social contact app most widely used in mainland China for instant messaging, social networking and chance encounters. Rather than conceived as a cultural tendency to be interpreted in isolation, the selfie is here understood as a popular genre of vernacular media production, influenced by a larger series of techno-social practices.

In "#nomakeupselfies: the Face of Hashtag Slacktivism" Claire Hampton brings together an auto-ethnographic reflection and a theoretical discussion of a meme that originated in support of breast cancer research, and consisted in posting selfies where the subject is not wearing any cosmetic products. By contextualising this trend in the framework of post-feminist culture, the paper complexifies some of the binary oppositions that have characterized the discourse on selfies (i.e. female oppression vs empowerment; social media's disciplining vs its liberating effects). As a breast cancer survivor and a selfie-taking feminist academic, the author interweaves her own reactions to the meme and theoretical reflections on the culturally constructed norms of feminine beauty that #nomakeupselfies both criticised and reaffirmed. The paper also highlights how distinct trends – such as self-commodification, consumer culture, and online activism – converged in this particular meme.

As this brief summary of the articles suggests, the present issue of *Networking Knowledge* offers a varied and interdisciplinary (although, of course, partial) account of how different areas of cultural studies are currently contributing to the debate on selfies. All authors have engaged in a conversation with existing scholarship on selfies, and they have shown how their particular field or area of expertise can provide insight into this phenomenon. We hope that the research presented here will stimulate further debate from even more fields of academic knowledge.

The editors would like to acknowledge the scholars involved in the "Selfies Research Network"[1]: their articles and books, as well as the bibliographies and materials compiled by them, have constituted a precious reference for many of the papers in this issue.

Dr Laura Busetta completed her PhD in Film Studies at the Sapienza University of Rome in 2013, with a thesis entitled "The Self-portrait Film". She has published articles in academic journals such as "Alphaville. Journal of Film and Screen Media", "Imago", "Fata Morgana", "Cineforum", and "Bianco e Nero". She is now pursuing research on self-representation in digital film and media, and has co-founded "Self-representation in Visual Culture", an international research network working on self-representation in visual arts, film, and new media.

Email laura.busetta@gmail.com

Dr Valerio Coladonato obtained a PhD in Film Studies at the Sapienza University of Rome, with a thesis on masculinities in contemporary cinema. He has published several essays in Italian and international journals, focusing on gender, and the reception and analysis of films. His research interests also include stardom in the Italian context, and the relationship between cinema, politics and new media

Email valerio.coladonato@gmail.com

1 See the network's webpage http://www.selfieresearchers.com/ and Facebook group https://www.facebook.com/groups/664091916962292/