

# SELFIE SEDUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF THE IMAGE

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## Introduction

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1. The seduction of the selfie, its appeal to viewers and takers, is often conflated with an infatuation with the self. The general claim is that selfies are narcissistic and that, like Narcissus peering in the pool, we too, are seduced by our own images. Press articles entitled “The Growing Narcissism of Selfies” (Williams 2013), “*Bienvenue dans l'ère des hyper-narcissiques*” (Chartier and Bousenna 2014) or “Sharing the (Self)love: The Rise of the Selfie and Digital Narcissism” (Chamorro-Premuzic 2014) prove the relationship between selfie-taking and narcissism has not gone unmissed by social commentators. The critique is at times virulent; Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, for example, writes: “Welcome to the age of digital narcissism, a world of endless ostentation opportunities and unlimited bragging possibilities. Showing off has never been easier and, ironically, more celebrated”. Social media and other digital technologies become co-conspirators in this rampant pathology: “Instagram made selfie the word of the year, while Tinder – the ultimate dating tool for narcissists – and Snapchat – the bastion of ephemeral sexting – made Facebook look intellectual”. Chamorro-Premuzic concludes, therefore, that “social media is to narcissists what crack is to crack addicts”.

2. This article will consider the selfie's particular allure through a deconstruction of its supposed narcissism. The fear of the selfie must be placed within a wider distrust of the image.<sup>1</sup> While the concept of narcissism is extremely rich and multi-faceted, it is applied too haphazardly to images of the self like the selfie. Indeed, the concept of narcissism has many definitions. It relates to the myth of Narcissus, it has psychoanalytical connotations (in particular through the writings of Sigmund Freud) as it describes an individual's capacity to interact with others, but also sociocultural ones with the work of Christopher Lasch in his book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age*

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1 Nicolas Mavrikakis develops this point in the first part of his book entitled *La Peur de l'image: d'hier à aujourd'hui*.

of *Diminishing Expectations* (1978). The main argument of his book, that “self-absorption defines the moral climate of contemporary society”<sup>2</sup> is updated in contemporary discourse by scholars like Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell in their book *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (2010). Yet images representing the self are not all narcissistic, nor are they narcissistic in the same way. More specifically, I will argue that the myth of Narcissus is a particularly poor comparison to the selfie practice, and I will consequently propose two theoretical alternatives: the concept of the interface and the concept of attraction. These alternatives will then be tested on a case study of spoof selfies. This article will not preclude all narcissistic tendencies to the selfie, but it will show that the narcissism in question must be qualified and defined. The questions which concern us here relate to those explored in W.J.T. Mitchell’s work *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005). In order to explain the question in the title of his book, Mitchell asserts that:

The point, however, is not to install a personification of the work of art as the master term but to put our relation to the work into question, to make the *relationality* of image and beholder the field of investigation. The idea is to make pictures less scrutable, less transparent; also to turn analysis of pictures toward questions of process, affect, and to put in question the spectator position.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar way, this article will analyze the relationship between the selfie image and its viewer, and, just as Mitchell speaks of the “surplus value”<sup>4</sup> of images, we will be considering the “surplus value” of selfies and the particular visual effects of this type of self-portrait. The proposed concepts better describe this relationship between viewer and selfie than the more commonly proposed concept of Ovidian narcissism.

3. Linked to the question of self-love is that of the love and fear of images, so adequately summed up in Régis Debray’s expression “*le stupéfiant image*” which describes images as both stunning and narcotic.<sup>5</sup> Selfies are a particularly rich example to think about images and their modes of seduction. Many scholars have noted how selfies force us to rethink photography and the visual in general. For example, Serge Tisseron argues that selfies question assumptions about photography, notably that photography is above all an image, that it functions as a witness or testimony, and that it bears witness to the past (Tisseron here refers to the Barthesian concept *ça a été*).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, selfie-taking is also a practice, not just an image. Selfies are as imagined or fictitious as they are a

2 C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, 25.

3 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, 49.

4 *Ibid.*, 76.

5 R. Debray, *Le Stupéfiant image : de la grotte Chauvet au Centre Pompidou*.

6 S. Tisseron, “Le selfie, ou la vérité en photographie”, n.p.

testimony to the past. They also are performative and present a potential future: the *ça a été* of the selfie is accompanied by a *ça pourrait être*. Serge Tisseron further defines the ideal selfie as that which “occurs at the moment when it is taken” and which remains only a few seconds.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, selfies are characterized by the immediacy of their sharing. The selfie is posted to social networks as quickly as possible and this rapid diffusion influences the production of the image. The selfie is not supposed to last, and Tisseron invokes applications like Snapchat which limit viewing times. For Serge Tisseron, selfies aim to reconcile representation and presence just as the relic did during the Roman Age. The selfie and the relic solve the question of the image in the same way. In these two types of images, it is not only a matter of *ça a été* but also of presence in the present. In this sense, selfies reactivate a long-standing desire to have images that function both as representations and as presences. Unfortunately, Tisseron does not tie these thought-provoking conclusions to visual strategies deployed within the images themselves. *How* do selfies communicate presence? This article hopes to address such questions about how selfies provoke the effects described by Tisseron. The analysis of our particular case study will show the precise functioning of the selfie’s visual characteristics. It will show how the selfie space, the selfie as image, influences the viewer. These images captivate our attention, attract our gaze and give us an illusion of having a special bond with the person represented. These effects must be explained.

4. To begin, I will focus on the concept of narcissism as understood through the myth of Narcissus. I will argue that this definition of narcissism does not apply to the selfie; it does not explain the particular operating mode of the selfie’s seduction tactics. Narcissus is a character in ancient Greek mythology, most famously recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The third section of the work tells the story of Echo and Narcissus. The latter’s tragic death is foreseen by Tiresias who, when asked if the child will live to a ripe old age answers: “Yes, if he never knows himself”.<sup>8</sup> Narcissus is disdainful of Echo’s love, as he is with all the other nymphs who are interested in him. One of them casts a spell on him: “May Narcissus love one day, so, himself, and not win over the creature whom he loves”.<sup>9</sup> Her wish is fulfilled and, one day, when Narcissus stops near a fountain of pure water to drink, he sees his thoughtful image and mistakes it for another person. He admires the body he sees and falls in love:

Here, Narcissus,

7 S. Tisseron, “Du selfie comme relique”, n.p.

8 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 68.

9 *Ibid.*, 70.

Worn from the heat of hunting, came to rest  
Finding the place delightful, and the spring  
Refreshing for the thirsty. As he tried  
To quench his thirst, inside him, deep within him,  
Another thirst was growing, for he saw  
An image in the pool, and fell in love  
With that unbodied hope, and found a substance  
In what was only shadow. He looks in wonder,  
Charmed by himself, spell-bound, and no more moving  
Than any marble statue. Lying prone  
He sees his eyes, twin stars, and locks as comely  
As those of Bacchus or the god Apollo,  
Smooth cheeks, and ivory neck, and the bright beauty  
Of countenance, and a flush of color rising  
In the fair whiteness. Everything attracts him  
That makes him so attractive. Foolish boy,  
He wants himself; the loved becomes the lover,  
The seeker sought, the kindler burns. How often  
He tries to kiss the image in the water,  
Dips in his arms to embrace the boy he sees there,  
And finds the boy, himself, elusive always,  
Not knowing what he sees, not burning for it,  
The same delusion mocking his eyes and teasing.<sup>10</sup>

10 *Ibid.*, 70.

Narcissus is fundamentally mistaken. He does not understand that he sees himself in the water. It is despairing, for every time he approaches the image to touch it, it disappears. There are different variations of the ending to this myth. Some say that Narcissus committed suicide. In Ovid's version, he dies of a broken heart, slumped on the grass: "His weary head sank to the greensward, and death closed the eyes that once had marveled at their owner's beauty. And even in Hell, he found a pool to gaze in, watching his image in the Stygian water".<sup>11</sup>

5. The selfie is not narcissistic in this sense. Narcissus does not understand that his reflection is an image; he is confused by the mediation.<sup>12</sup> The myth therefore does not allow for an appropriate description of the visual dynamics involved in the selfie. A selfie produces an ostentatious, intentional, and visible gesture. It is never an accidental image. The selfie taker orchestrates the image capture. The photographer is not duped or deceived by the representational process. The required implication and visual awareness are therefore at odds with Narcissus's reaction, confused and unsuspecting.<sup>13</sup> To invoke a mythological narcissism, then, masks the particular organization of the visual and operative space of the selfie. The two alternative concepts I propose to describe the selfie's mode of seduction account for the selfie's particular distribution and organization of visual space. They serve to conceptualize the selfie's spatial strategies, in particular the conscious and dialectic link between the viewer and the viewed. The case study will show that the narcissism at play is more about a theory of the environment. The selfie and its narcissism can only be understood through their fundamental relationality.

## Interface and Attraction

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6. I propose two theoretical alternatives to a narcissistic understanding of selfies based on the Ovidian myth: the interface, on the one hand, and attraction as theorized by André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning for early cinema, on the other. These two concepts serve to describe a spatial organization between spectator and image and to question not the content of the selfie, but the way

11 *Ibid.*, 73.

12 Philippe Dubois also discusses photography through the lens of the myth of Narcissus. See: "Histoires d'ombres et mythologies au miroir : l'index dans l'Histoire de l'Art" in *L'Acte photographique et autres essais*.

13 In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan offers a similar analysis of the myth of Narcissus. For him, technology, which functions as an extension of Man, a prosthesis, keeps us from truly recognizing ourselves: "It is perhaps indicative of the bias of our intensely technological and, therefore, narcotic culture, that we have long interpreted the Narcissus story to mean that he fell in love with himself, that he imagined the reflection to be Narcissus! [...] Physiologically there are abundant reasons for an extension of ourselves involving us in a state of numbness. [...] This is the sense of the Narcissus myth. The young man's image is a self-amputation or extension induced by irritating pressures" (42-46).

it operates as image.

7. The key to the myth of Narcissus is that he does not understand that the image he sees is a reflection. He falls in love with his image thinking that the reflection is in fact someone else. Narcissus does not understand the relation between his body and the reflective water, and he is deceived by this mirroring. Thus, beyond a love for his image, there is a total lack of understanding of the mediations at play and of the space in which they operate. This space is that of the interface, where two separate entities come into relation with one another. Narcissus misreads the dynamics of this space, not realizing that what he sees is a double of himself. The selfie, on the contrary, problematizes this space of the interface between the subject and the reflective device. It shows this space ostensibly with each new photographic capture. To take a selfie is a conscious act, a voluntary gesture of the photographer, a staged performance of and within the interface space. Selfie takers know very well that they are producing an image. The selfie represents, visualizes, this interface between the photographer and the camera – in particular with the inclusion of the arm that passes through this space. Narcissus' credulity cannot, therefore, explain the self-reflexive character of the selfie. The interface as a theoretical concept, however, raises fundamental questions of relationality and communication.
8. I therefore argue that the space between the camera and the photographer must be understood as an interface and that the selfie stages this space. While the current use of the term "interface" essentially refers to technologies that are at the point of contact between users and their devices (such as the touch screen) in a more theoretical sense, the interface is a porous and fundamentally relational zone. Scholars define the concept of interface in many ways, but the common thread is the importance of relations. For Alexander Galloway the interface is above all a mediation space:

The interface is a general technique of mediation evident at all levels; indeed it facilitates the way of thinking that tends to pitch things in terms of "levels" or "layers" in the first place. These levels, these many interfaces, are the subject of analysis not so much to explain what they are, but to show that the social field itself constitutes a grand interface, an interface between subject and world, between surface and source, and between critic and the objects of criticism. Hence the interface is above all an allegorical device that will help us gain some perspective on culture in the age of information.<sup>14</sup>

Interfaces are zones of interaction, not so much a thing as a process.<sup>15</sup> For Brandon Hookway, the interface is also a form of relationship,<sup>16</sup> but defined by a double process of coming together and of

14 A. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 54.

15 *Ibid.*, 13; 33.

16 B. Hookway, *Interface*, 14.

distancing. The interface is then the realization of a contradiction.<sup>17</sup> Hookway is interested in the agency and control within the interface in a way similar to Michel Foucault's interest in the *dispositif*. Indeed, according to Hookway, "in its simultaneity of relations, the interface describes an entanglement of power, agency, and subjectivity, as much as it does of the technological and the political".<sup>18</sup> Considering all these definitions and their implications, the interface should be understood more precisely as a spatial rendering of mediation. It is the field of operation of mediation. A variation of this definition appears at the very end of Francesco Casetti's book *Inside the Gaze: Fiction Film and its Spectator* (1998). In this book, which analyzes how the cinema designates, situates and sends its viewer on a certain trajectory,<sup>19</sup> the interface is used to describe the mediation space that opens up between the viewer and the screen:

By virtue of this fact, facing two realities whose interconnection is not quite obvious – signifieds on the one hand, and behaviors on the other – our analysis must insist on the existence of a space expressly destined to be a space of mediation. It proposes a double confrontation where one alone has proven insufficient. Hence an interface.<sup>20</sup>

The function of any interface, Casetti tells us, is to ensure a "double transitivity".<sup>21</sup> In the case of the selfie, we can speak of the interface between the photographer and the camera, and that between the spectator and the image.

9. The concept of interface raises a whole new series of questions about the selfie. Researchers interested in selfies generally tend to focus on its diffusion. Agathe Lichtensztein, in her book *Le Selfie: aux frontières de l'égoportrait*, proclaims, for example, that "*le selfie hors internet n'est plus interface*".<sup>22</sup> While I agree with other points of her analysis – notably that narcissism is not the only characteristic of the selfie – I argue that the concept of interface allows us to think about how to analyze the production of selfies *and* their dissemination. The relationality of the interface makes it possible to describe the communicative and social aspects of the selfie, even before its diffusion through online publication and sharing. The popularity of these self-portraits often prevents a more thorough interrogation of the practice itself and directs selfie research to the dissemination of the photographs. What interests us in the selfie within the scope of this special issue on seduction is not the rapid diffusion of the selfie thanks to image-sharing platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or

17 *Ibid.*, 9.

18 *Ibid.*, 31.

19 F. Casetti, *Inside the Gaze: Fiction Film and its Spectator*, 14.

20 *Ibid.*, 130.

21 *Ibid.*, 132.

22 A. Lichtensztein, *Le Selfie: aux frontières de l'égoportrait*, 8.

Snapchat. Indeed, this diffusion of images does not just apply to selfies. Instead, this article will instead focus on what makes us stop and look at any one of these images in particular. The concept of interface allows a useful theoretical bridge, from the mobile phone and the relational space created by the selfie gesture, and the influence of the photographer on the relational space with the viewer, in addition to post-production sharing of the image.

10. The second concept I propose describes the visual effects caused by the relationality of the selfie. If we return to the myth of Narcissus once more, Narcissus loves his image so much that he is not aware of the processes of mediation, capture and transmission. He sees only the content of the image (himself) without realizing that the image is an image. He is completely absorbed by the subject of the image and does not perceive its status as image. The opposite is true for selfies, since the photographer is very conscious of his/her performance in front of the camera. There is an intentionality in every selfie and the resultant image is less a photograph of a person, than a photograph of a person photographing himself/herself. As Adam Levin explains “it serves less as a self-portrait, and more as a portrait of the self in the act of self-portrayal”.<sup>23</sup> The process of representation is the very subject of the image.

11. The concept of attraction as theorized by André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning makes it possible to analyze these different modes of viewing where the viewer is more or less aware of the representation as such. Initially used to describe the spectator's particular relationship to early cinema, the concept of attraction is now applied to current cinematography as well.<sup>24</sup> Wanda Strauven's anthology, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (2006), describes the various and contested applications of the concept. In her introduction to the book, Strauven underlines the terminological difficulties and the semantic instability that are linked to the concept's complex elaboration (11-21). The term “cinema of attraction” first appeared in 1986 with the publication of two articles: the first, by Tom Gunning “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” republished in *Early Cinema History: Space Frame Narrative* edited by Adam Barker and Thomas Elsaesser (1990); the second, an article by Gaudreault and Gunning entitled “*Le Cinéma des premiers temps: un défi à l'Histoire du cinéma*” published in a Japanese magazine.<sup>25</sup>

23 A. Levin, “The Selfie in the Age of Digital Recursion”, n.p.

24 See for example: Tom Brown's article ““The DVD of Attractions?”” or C. Moulton's article “The Future is a Fairground: Attraction and Absorption in 3D Cinema”.

25 Wanda Strauven explains that this article was republished in its original French version in 1989: “Le Cinéma des premiers temps: un défi à l'Histoire du cinéma?” in *Histoire du cinéma : nouvelles Approches*, edited by Jacques Aumont, André Gaudreault and Michel Marie, Paris: Sorbonne, 46-93. Strauven's volume publishes the first English translation of this text. In 1989, Tom Gunning also published “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator” in *Art and Text* 34 (Spring 1989): 31-45. This article was republished in *Film Theory and*

The majority of scholars refer to later articles, in particular Tom Gunning's version in Barker and Elsaesser's edited volume. If the concept of attraction is now one of the most productive in film studies, the fear is that its use has become too widespread. It is therefore important to take the time to explain how the concept was first defined by Gunning and Gaudreault in order to show how it applies to the study of the selfie.

12. For Gaudreault and Gunning, the concept of attraction applies essentially to early cinema. Tom Gunning describes this cinema as fundamentally exhibitionist; it builds a different relationship with the viewer by using, for example, the look to camera:

This action, which is later perceived as spoiling the realistic illusion of the cinema, is here undertaken with brio, establishing contact with the audience. From comedians smirking at the camera, to the constant bowing and gesturing of the conjurers in magic films, this is a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to break a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator.<sup>26</sup>

The concept deliberately refers to amusement parks, since, according to Gunning, early cinema is itself an attraction for spectators not yet accustomed to moving images.<sup>27</sup> The cinema of attraction plays with these astonished spectators; their attention is grabbed almost by force. This early cinema described by Gaudreault and Gunning doesn't deeply develop the characters and their psychology. Rather, it challenges the viewer directly because it attracts their attention.

To summarize, the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself. The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature, such as the early close-ups just described, or trick films in which a cinematic manipulation (slow motion, reverse motion, substitution, multiple exposure) provides the film's novelty. Fictional situations tend to be restricted to gags, vaudeville numbers or recreations of shocking or curious incidents (executions, current events). It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to filmmaking. Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe. The cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. Making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward an acknowledged spectator

*Criticism*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 818-832 (Strauven 2006: 25 see endnote 2).

26 T. Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," 382.

27 *Ibid.*, 383.

rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative.<sup>28</sup>

It is a cinema that shows itself; it is displayed frankly, and part of the pleasure comes from a certain awareness of the device itself; the cinema is attractive as such. For Gunning, the cinema of attractions is an “inexhaustible resource”<sup>29</sup> which has continued throughout the history of cinema as a minor mode and has been recovered and exploited by avant-garde cinema.

13. Gaudreault's formulations of the concept relate the cinema of attraction to another concept, that of monstration. In the article he coauthored with Gunning<sup>30</sup> and in his book *Cinéma et attraction: pour une nouvelle histoire du cinématographe*,<sup>31</sup> Gaudreault defines two modes of early filmic practice: a system of monstrative attractions and a system of narrative integration. The system of monstrative attractions dominated until about 1908 and the system of narrative integration was prevalent until about 1914. For Gaudreault, “cinematographic language” (close-ups, diving, traveling) does not have the same functions in these two systems. The idea of monstration accentuates the exhibitionist aspect of the cinema of attraction and these two concepts are opposed to narration.

14. Since its first theorization, many critics, including Gunning and Gaudreault, have nuanced this opposition between attraction and narration. This nuance is important in applying the concept of attraction to the selfie. It is not a question of getting rid of all narration by saying that the content of the selfie is not important or that it does not matter to the viewer. For us, the value of the concept of attraction is in its shift of focus to another form of viewing. On the one hand, Narcissus's immersion in his reflection seems to represent the total and fatal attraction of a spectator seduced by his/her image. If there is a form of attraction in the myth of Narcissus, it is therefore not the one theorized by Gunning and Gaudreault. Their description of attraction applies, however, to the selfie system and the relationship between the image and the viewer. I postulate that the selfie is part of a *photography of attractions*, which Peter Buse has begun to define through the Polaroid. Peter Buse situates the Polaroid within a history of media practices, arguing that the advent of the digital age sheds new perspective on the polaroid version of snapshot photography. He describes this snapshot practice as a photography of attractions:

In polaroid photography, the material activity of making the image, the fact that it develops on the spot rather than later in a darkroom, is [...] an event in itself. So important has the “event” of instant

28 *Ibid.*, 384.

29 *Ibid.*, 387.

30 A. Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, “Early Cinema as a Challenge to Film History,” 373.

31 A. Gaudreault, *Cinéma et attraction: pour une nouvelle histoire du cinématographe*, 97-109.

photography been in its history that we can speak of it as a “photography of attractions”, to borrow and modify a term from Tom Gunning. Gunning and others have argued that, in early cinema, “attractions” took priority over narrative in seducing the spectator, with the filmic apparatus itself one of the main attractions, and it will be argued here that a similar principle applies for the user of Polaroid photography, for whom the spectacle of the technology is just as important as any image which results from it.<sup>32</sup>

Just like the Polaroid, the selfie shows itself as such, and the pleasure of the selfie is not only found in the result obtained, but in the very process of photographic capture.

15. There is slippage between the attraction of the camera itself and the attraction of the final image. And this shift already takes place in the definitions of Gaudreault and Gunning which describe the fascination of spectators for moving images and the machine producing them, as well as aesthetic forms such as the look to camera. In their article on cultural series and optical toys, Nicolas Dulac and André Gaudreault define two different forms of attraction, a passive form of attraction where the user is “just” a spectator, and a more active form of attraction, where the user is also a player that must interact with the *dispositif*. For example, there is an “interactive” dimension that is central to the attractiveness of the optical toy where pleasure comes as much from the illusion of movement as from the manipulation of the toy. The *dispositif* presupposes that its “user” is a “player” involved in its own functioning, not just an isolated spectator. According to Dulac and Gaudreault, “[t]he advantage of such an approach is that attraction, here, is no longer seen as a stage phenomenon but rather as a structuring principle upon which the entire visual experience and very functioning of the apparatus rests”.<sup>33</sup> Thus, for Dulac and Gaudreault, there is an active and a passive form of attraction, depending on the involvement of the viewer in the operation of the device. In the case of the selfie, we could say that the photographer is not only a player, but a taker or a director. The selfie taker is not only spectator of the attraction, nor even just a player, he/she instigates and controls all aspects of its elaboration.

16. In the next section I will apply these concepts to a particular case study to show how the selfie image is attractive to the viewer in the sense described by Gaudreault and Gunning for early cinema. Indeed, taking a selfie puts emphasis on the subject represented. The selfie serves to accentuate the event, to make it meaningful. Selfies thus foreground the deictic function of photography. The complicit look and the intentional gesture of the capture of the image serve to

32 P. Buse, “The Polaroid Image as Photo-Object”, 192.

33 N. Dulac and André Gaudreault, “Circularity and Repetition at the Heart of the Attraction: Optical Toys and the Emergence of the New Optical Series”, 228.

point, to designate, to show what must be seen. The visibility of the photographic gesture in the final image is paramount. It is used to characterise the space – both between the photographer and the camera, and also between the viewer and the image. This gesture positions us as a spectator situated where the device is, and we feel close to the selfie taker. The viewer is placed in a new relationship to the image, just as the photographer interacts in a new way with the camera.

17. It might seem strange to borrow a concept that is so fundamental to film theory and apply it to static images. There are, however, several good reasons for using this concept. First, there is simply no equivalent in the theorization of photography. Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida* (1980), offers a theory of photographic reception that is organized around the two concepts of *studium* and *punctum*. The latter can be compared to attraction since both serve to describe a physical reaction of the spectator. The *punctum*, however, does not describe an intended effect created by the photographer. For Barthes, the *punctum* can only be perceived by the spectator; it is not placed in the photograph by the photographer (or “the Operator”).<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, the selfie is intentionally attractive. The photographer very consciously curates his/her own performance. For selfies, the concept of attraction is therefore more useful. Second, the concept of attraction characterizes, rather than a particular form of image, a mode of viewing that is likely to apply to any form of visual culture, as noted by Scott Bukatman: “Gunning’s exploration of the cinema of attractions has proven immensely important to the study of visual culture as well as the studies of sensation and sensationalism”.<sup>35</sup> The concept of attraction is particularly relevant to describe the functioning of an economy of attention which applies to several cultural forms, in particular advertising and images circulating on social media. Thirdly, current devices such as cell phones, GoPros and other digital cameras can take photographs and videos in an almost identical fashion. iPhones now allow users to take “live photos” and Facebook profile photos can now be short videos. It is therefore difficult to treat photography and cinema as distinct categories of images. In this context of convergence, a cinema of attractions may not be so different from a photography of attractions. With our current devices that easily take a photographic snapshot or a video, it is useful to find methodologies and theoretical concepts that make it possible to think the visual in a less compartmentalized way.

## A Selfie Case Study

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34 R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 72.

35 S. Bukatman, “Spectacle, Attractions and Visual Pleasure”, 71.

18. In 2013, the same year that the word “selfie” was elected word of the year by the Oxford English Dictionary, the advertising firm Lowe and Partners launched a campaign for *The Cape Times* based on the growing popularity of selfies. The advertisers altered known photographs of historical figures to transform them into selfies. Thus, the photograph of Paul Schutzer showing Jackie Kennedy and her husband in a car in 1960 becomes a simulation of a self-portrait taken by Jackie herself, eliminating the role of the press photographer. Other examples include Winston Churchill, Prince William kissing his wife Kate Middleton, and the famous kiss of victory in Times Square. These spoof selfies circulated widely online. In each photograph, the arm of the photographed subject is modified in order to extend towards the outside of the image, towards the spectator, and towards an imagined camera or smartphone. These recreated selfies testify to the cultural influence of the selfie as an identifiable form and push us to question the added value the selfie form brings to the original photographs. These are clear before and after shots. The advertisements are only accompanied by a minimal and small slogan (“Every story feels like a first-hand account”), so the photographs must be immediately recognizable as selfies – and they are. Despite the black and white coloring which highlights their historic and pre-selfie status, our gaze ignores the anachronism of such reconstructed images and easily reads these images as selfies. They correspond perfectly to the definition of the genre, in particular by the notorious presence of the subject’s arm which occupies a good quarter of the photograph in the four examples. In this, the retouching is perfect.

19. The comparison of the original photographs with the simulated selfies makes it possible to identify the added value of this modification. Firstly, there is more perceived intimacy in the selfie version. The advertisements rely on the supposed proximity required for a selfie (the distance of an outstretched arm) to create this impression. This gesture establishes a standard and a language to which everybody can identify, because everyone must take a selfie in the same way. With a selfie, there is no longer the need for a photographer to act as mediator between Jackie Kennedy and spectators. If Jackie had really taken this selfie, she would have chosen to take the image and to share it. Since these selfies are used to describe and sell *The Cape Times*, the supposed intimacy of the selfie form is meant to reflect the journalistic values of the periodical. The advertising campaign claims that *The Cape Times* brings us closer to the news and gives us direct access: “Every story feels like a first hand account. Getting you closer to the news”. The selfie version of these photographs translates this supposed intimacy into visual terms in a surprising way, because in reality, the retouched images are not that different. The proximity felt in the selfie version does not

result from a narrower framing of the original photograph. It derives only from Jackie's knowing look and the fictitious arm crossing the space that separates it from the camera. The unique contribution of this arm transforms the press photograph into a selfie, bringing with it all the connotations of this "new" genre.

20. This imagined gesture testifies to an intentionality on the part of Jackie Kennedy, a willingness to interact with others through a self-assertive movement. This is in fact a staged intimacy, one that is meant to be shared, something like what Serge Tisseron describes as "extimacy". Serge Tisseron uses this concept to counter the widespread idea of a "tyranny of intimacy" in our public spaces and especially on the Internet. For him the desire to show oneself is anterior to that of privacy.<sup>36</sup> Extimacy is therefore used to describe the process by which fragments of the intimate self are shown to others for validation.<sup>37</sup> For Tisseron, intimacy and extimacy work together in the construction of the self through the search for recognition and separation from the other. In this case, Jackie is in control of her image and the representational process. The effect of intimacy is thus given by the outstretched arm and by the subject's direct look. These two elements place us physically and psychologically in Jackie's personal space and corporeal proximity. Jackie's complicit look gives us permission to be there. However, this look is also searching for a return gaze; it is a look seeking to be looked at in return. This is typical of the type of dialectical relationship established through an interface. Indeed, the visual effect of an impression of intimacy, is accompanied by a desire to be seen, to show oneself to others, which we can qualify as extimacy. Paradoxically, *The Cape Times* claims intimacy and proximity to the news, but for all its readership.
21. The second added value of the selfie "after" photo is its attraction; the selfie is a photography of attractions. In a context of an advertising campaign, the selfie is a good seller; its function for *The Cape Times* is to grab the attention of the reader/spectator of the newspaper. Jackie reaches physically out to the spectator, as if touching them. Her arm organizes the space, establishing a face-to-face rapport. The selfie look can therefore be compared to the look to camera which is characteristic of the cinema of attractions. Francesco Casetti discusses at length this camera gaze in his work on the film viewer, *Inside the Gaze: Fiction Film and its Spectator* (1998). For him, the camera gaze is directed towards a viewer posited as the interlocutor of the film, an interlocutor who must recognize himself/herself as such.<sup>38</sup> The most commonly cited example of this type of look is taken from the silent film *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903). A scene from the

36 S. Tisseron, "Intimité et extimité", 84.

37 *Ibid.*, 84.

38 F. Casetti, *op. cit.*, 17.

movie shows a bandit shooting at close range on the spectator. The actor breaks the fourth wall by looking at the camera (and the spectator) directly. The affront on the spectator is double, combining both by the disturbing look of the bandit and the direct threat of the pistol. The look to camera illustrated by this example is generally considered a destabilizing element in the narrative, as Tom Brown explains in the preface to his book *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema*: “It is often assumed that for narrative filmmaking, this destroys the illusion of the story world and, by acknowledging the technology behind the camera (i.e. the camera), distances us from the fiction”.<sup>39</sup> Casetti also speaks of a “taboo,” an “affront to the proper functioning of representation and the filmic narrative,” since in “unmasking the game” this camera gaze destroys it.<sup>40</sup> Breaking the fourth wall is not systematically indicative of a cinema of attractions, nor does it always proscribe a narrative function. In the case of the imitation selfie, though, there is an attraction effect. Indeed, Jackie’s ostentatious gesture inserted in the image changes the out-of-frame reference of the photograph. In the original photograph, the presence of a photographer is necessary, which creates a public dimension to the image. The original photograph represents an event, or at least a historical couple, and thus the image holds a certain narrative value. The photographer was present to photograph the couple during the presidential campaign in 1960 and the spectator is not included in this out-of-frame context. In the fake selfie of Jackie, however, there is a greater tension between Jackie and a viewer who would be within reach – or at close range, and therefore included in the out-of-frame context. Jackie’s look and complicit gesture remind us of our own presence as spectators, as we imagine ourselves within the car with Jackie. The selfie refers less to the relation between the image and the context out of frame, than to the relationship established between image and viewer. Thus, the narrative dimension of the news photograph is lost, or at least diminished. This direct relation to the viewer is instead typical of the cinema of attraction: “instead of contributing to a cohesive and flowing narrative structure, the film’s tricks seem to slow the picture down, drawing attention to themselves, and repeatedly announcing the power of cinema as a medium capable of focusing attention on the act of seeing”.<sup>41</sup> *The Cape Times* selfies demonstrate a similar ability to stage a conscious gaze on either side of the image; Jackie’s complicit look is that of a subject conscious of her own gaze and aware that she is also being watched. Jackie also registers our presence as spectators who cannot forget our watching action. We are like unmasked voyeurs. For the ad campaign, this attraction serves less to inform the viewer/reader of *The Cape*

39 T. Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, x.

40 F. Casetti, *op. cit.*, 17.

41 Leigh Mercer quoted in A. Cox, “A New ‘Cinema of Attractions’?”, 535.

*Times* than to situate him/her in a privileged and dramatized relationship to the subject at hand. It is used to format this relationship between viewer and image.

22. The attraction of the selfie makes the interface created by the selfie gesture palpable. This is the third added value of the selfie: to highlight the space of the interface. Through the interface and the tension that is established by the attraction mode, the two poles of this space are included within the image. The dialectic established by the attraction in these selfies gives the viewer the impression of seeing from both sides of the interface. We have, on the one hand, Jackie's corporeality which is very present in the image through, essentially, her arm that holds the device and practically touches the spectator. Her conscious gaze also highlights an affective and corporeal complicity between Jackie and the recording device. The selfie image is thus a somatic photograph that makes one feel a Barthesian *ça a été* (1980). We feel the physical presence of Jackie Kennedy in the picture. On the other hand, the photograph represents an outsider's look onto Jackie. That is to say, the point of view is not purely that of Jackie herself, a subjective point of view where we would see the world as if we were Jackie. Selfies make it possible to unite within the same image a double point of view, from a somatically present Jackie, but also from the outside of her body. This ambivalence in points of view, the hybridity of looks, can only function within an interface, whereby both poles of the space mutually influence each other. It is through the interface and its relationality that such a doubling can take place.
23. This advertising campaign for *The Cape Times* shows that the added or surplus value of selfies is threefold. It resides in the shared intimacy simulated by the image, the attraction of this photographic form, and the exploration of the interface which allows a doubling of the point of view. The effect of attraction is very visible if we consider the selfie look as a look to camera. The concepts of attraction and interface describe the seductive visual effects of the selfie on the viewer, more so than a return to the myth of Narcissus. They are operative terms which describe how the seductiveness of the selfie works.
24. While these terms are drawn from disciplines outside of Art History, they allow for a deeper exploration of recurring issues for art historians. Indeed, W.J.T. Mitchell asks "What do images want?" so as to bring the focus of critical interrogations onto the relationship between image and viewer.<sup>42</sup> Michael Fried further argues that the relationship between painting and beholder is a "matter of vital importance": "In fact", he says, "it is the crux of the story I have to tell".<sup>43</sup> Fried

42 W.J.T. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 49.

43 M. Fried, *Theatricality and Absorption: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, 3.

uses the terms “absorption” and “theatricality” to discuss the ways in which the relationship between painting and beholder were being negotiated, established, and contested during the Enlightenment. Denis Diderot’s writing, according to Fried, played an important role in theorizing this beholder’s presence. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the successful painter had to successfully draw the beholder into the painting, allowing them to forget his/her situation of spectatorship. There is therefore a tension between theatricality and absorption that is negotiated by the image. This is precisely what is happening with the selfie, except the selfie does not favour theatricality or absorption, it showcases both. The ostentatious selfie pose theatrically exposes the capturing process and the self-consciousness of the photographer, which in turn makes the beholder, the viewer, very aware of his/her situation of viewing. At the same time, we are drawn into the image, attracted by its seeming transparency and intimacy which is greatly emphasized by the photographic medium.<sup>44</sup> Attraction and the interface, as concepts, help us to describe this tension between absorption and theatricality that is at the heart of the selfie’s seduction, and they contribute further to art historians’ interrogations of the relationship between images and viewers, art and its beholders.

25. The three added values of the selfie form, intimacy/extimacy, attraction, and the staging of the interface within the image, serve to draw attention and, in the case of the *Cape Times* campaign, to sell the product they are marketing. The selfie image is popular, ostentatious, eye-catching and promotional. This is another reason why this case study is so relevant. It shows very concretely the link between selfies and an attention economy. As consumers/lookers, it is our attention which is the key, and marketing strategies are increasingly vying for it. Considering the selfie within this wider context and economy of attention, which has historical, cultural and theoretical underpinnings, allows us to shed new light on the supposed selfishness of these images. Aleida Assmann’s work on attention is very important in this respect. It considers attention not as a stable entity but as a cultural habitus that changes with media transformations.<sup>45</sup> In particular, she focuses on the modes of attention associated with print, and the upheavals provoked by the new material forms of the book today. She makes an interesting detour through painting and Fried’s work on Diderot to put our current attention economy back into a long history of media strategies. According to Assmann, the absorption Fried is describing and experienced during the age of print now corresponds to

44 Linda Haverty Rugg touches upon the relationship between photography and referentiality in her book *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography* (1997). She explains that: “photography placed in conjunction with autobiographical texts helps to unpack the issue of reference in all its complexity”, 2.

45 A. Assmann, “The Shaping of Attention by Cultural Frames and Media Technology”, 22.

interaction and immersion so present in digital media.<sup>46</sup> Like Fried, she highlights the two logics of mediality, absorption and theatricality, that are also expressed in such a confounding way by the selfie form. Her research argues against the common misconception that the attention economy is uniquely a recent phenomenon. Her work shows that attention is a historical and intermedial concept. Her work is particularly pertinent to us because it resonates with our own warning against a simplistic application of the concept of narcissism to selfies, a practice that is too often considered only in its relation to the contemporary. Identities and subjectivities are created and performed by the selfie gesture which serves above all as an insertion of the subject into an economy of attention. In this sense, the narcissism of selfies should be understood not through Ovid's myth, but in philosophical and relational ways, as an ongoing process whereby the subject situates himself/herself within an environment and vis-à-vis others.<sup>47</sup>

26. Finally, I would like to conclude with André Gunthert's analysis of the selfie. In an interview with the newspaper *Libération* in August 2015, he describes the selfie as an "*embrayeur de la conversation*" and as such "*le selfie doit être moche*".<sup>48</sup> For Gunthert, through a subtle mix, often accompanied by irony and self-deprecation, selfies cultivate "*une esthétique du râté*". Certainly, as a conversation starter, selfies must attract attention through a regulation of space which causes certain distortions of perspective and by modified self-portraiture codes. However, if humor and self-derision are an integral part of the case study analyzed in this article, this is not the case for all selfies. Treating selfies as so many ugly self-portraits is to be disconnected from the current practice of this photographic form. If the "new" selfie was shocking or maybe even ugly to viewers at first, our case study testifies to the selfie's great readability and integration into the visual practices of our time. Further, Facebook continuously shows us that a very large number of people publish selfies that are not seen as ugly. Quite the contrary. Thus, while I disagree with this aesthetic judgment of the selfie as "ugly", I do agree with Gunthert's underlying hypothesis, which is the same as Serge Tisseron's. Both scholars argue that selfies push us to think about the visual differently and to question representative practices in general.<sup>49</sup> The analysis of my chosen case study shows that it is possible to describe the visual effects of the selfie – which may be shocking or ugly to some – but which in reality are much more complex. To analyze the selfie is to think about visual and

46 *Ibid.*, 37.

47 See Pleshette DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism: A Case for an Im-Possible Self-Love* (2014), Elizabeth Lunbeck *The Americanization of Narcissism* (2013), and Julie Walsh *Narcissism and its Discontents* (2015) for such philosophical approaches to narcissism.

48 L. Iribarnegaray, "André Gunthert: 'Embrayeur de la conversation, le selfie doit être moche'", n.p.

49 For a more detailed discussion of the selfie, see André Gunthert's book *L'Image partagée: la photographie numérique* (2015).

representational practices in a new way, and in the case of this particular article, to think about how images continue to seduce us. Selfie seduction is not about a particular esthetic, but about how images operate, and this is a conversation we need to keep having as scholars of visual culture.

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