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Crafting Identity on Instagram:
Authentic Expression or Manufactured Image?

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INDEX

INTRODUCTION	3
CHAPTER 1: THE SELFIE IS NOT THE HEIR TO THE THRONE OF PORTRAIT	7
1.1 Methods of Self-Representation Over Time	10
1.2 The Selfie in the Age of the Networked Photography.....	16
1.3 Towards the Erasure of the Face.....	21
1.4 The Missing Faces of Artists	26
CHAPTER 2: OUR INSTAGRAM FEED IS OUR AUTOBIOGRAPHY	31
2.2 Writing our own autobiography on social networks	35
2.3 The concept of control in the digital world	39
2.4 Social Media: Masculine or Feminine Plural Noun?	46
2.5 Reclaiming Control Over One's Image.....	48
CHAPTER 3: FILTERS AS REVEALERS OF THE INTANGIBLE	55
3.1 Social networks as places dominated by manipulation	58
3.2 Digital Filters and Their Influence on the Perception of the Created Image.....	62
3.3 Filters as Emotions' Revealers	64
3.4 The Case Study: Hacking with Corinne Mazzoli	69
CONCLUSIONS	81
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SITOGRAPHY	85
FIGURE INDEX	93
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	95

INTRODUCTION

This thesis work begins with the intention of investigating the virtual world, since social media now represents a daily practice in almost everyone's life. The democratization of media and the globalization of communications have become everyday practices that inevitably affect our routines. The ability to talk to whoever you want whenever you want, and to be able to perform certain practices, including precisely self-representation, at any time of the day with a single click, has changed our habits. It is a new way of approaching each other that so embedded in our daily lives, is often taken for granted. In reality, it is a very recent and very rapidly developing environment, and therefore needs more study. By reflecting on how methodologies and means have evolved, it makes it possible to understand how, in parallel, we and the way we experience everyday life have also evolved. This study seeks to explore the root of some of our impulses, such as precisely that of self-representation and thus of presenting ourselves to others by trying to shape our image as we deem appropriate.

The creation of one's image on the Web and its presentation to others - where by others I mean a very large community of followers - is a concept that resonates in our lives constantly; because, although we often do not even realize it, our every action on social media can become a way to speak about ourselves. In a world hyper-saturated with information, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to be able to find one's own voice. In addition, this process is made even more complex by a society that forces subjects to conform and to fit into certain aesthetic and identity standards. For these reasons, the self sometimes finds itself constrained and not free to express itself. This phenomenon is amplified within the social world, precisely because of the ease of getting in touch with the media, resulting in a self-representation that, although personal, ceases to submit to those stereotypes and is therefore not reflective of our self. In addition, there is another factor that can lead one to don't trust in the social media medium: it is impossible to ignore that these are highly controlled places, where strict rules apply. Risks and difficulties are the standard in this regard, and this is the reason why I think it is necessary to grasp the specificities of medium: instead of being subjugated by it or making futile use of it, we have to understand how it works and the reasoning that entails in order to master and use it for our purposes.

I always trusted in social media as a valid medium for presenting oneself to the world and expressing one's individuality, as long as it is used consciously. But in the public's opinion it would actually be a medium pervaded by falsehoods. This reminds of pretty much each new medium in the moment it was introduced, as the reactions entail wonder and excitement as much as suspicion and

distrust do. So my question is, why do we distrust this medium, considering that it is not so dissimilar from others? It may seem a rhetorical question: it is an easily corruptible place, because of the presence of filters, curated feeds, and staged moments. With this thesis aims I propose to provocatively overturn this notion, in so far as it is precisely the highly manipulable nature of social networks features that makes them highly subjective, and able to represent us.

This is precisely the reason why I believe it is strongly necessary not to be dominated by these technologies, which permeate our lives, and on the contrary take ownership of our image. With this thesis I intend to show how, by regaining control over the medium, it is possible within social media to create what I term a *representation of resistance*, that is, a representation able to take control of the rules and restrictions of the medium, with the aim of hacking it. This allow users to use social media according to their own purposes and to get agency over their image online.

The first chapter firstly defines the concept of the mask. Since it is considered by default as something of that covers the truth, providing a false representation, I firstly outline my own definition: a surface that overlays our self, so as to make it concrete and tangible to those who interface with us. Thus, every method of self-representation becomes a mask, which is different according to the various context where it is used. The chapter then proceeds with an analysis of the evolution of different tools of self-representation, from portraiture to analogue and digital photography, examining the innovative characteristic of the latter, especially in the direction of favoring a vernacular production. Following this, the phenomenon of the selfie is investigated, identified as the heir of the self-portrait because of its coincidence with the face. However, my thesis disagrees with the predominance of the face, aiming to demonstrate how there is a growing trend towards the erasure of the face as it termed by [1.3], amongst others: in the moment of self-representation, it is no longer important to represent one's face, as it is not the main point when expressing one's personality. This thesis is supported by the presentation of works by selected artists, in which they present themselves differently, but never through their face.

The second chapter focuses on the role of social platforms and how they are used to create and display our digital identity. After identifying the characteristics of social media and, in particular of Instagram, their ability to articulate our narrative, such that our feed becomes a true autobiography; I focus on the concept of control and surveillance. These are key concepts within visual studies, for which the debate between various scholars is open. The goal is to re-define control within social media as something, at least partially, in the hands of the user. Despite a series of constraints, actually each of us has the possibility to post freely and to choose the contents, thus controlling the construction of our image online. In this regard, it is important to dwell on gender biases, and in

particular on the issue of the representation of the female body. Women have always been the subject to prejudices and standards, so their representation has always been sexualized and fetishized. Therefore, it is important that women, recognizing social networks as platforms where they can regain their voice and rely on the support of their community, choose to get re-appropriation over their own representation. Taking control of the depiction of one's body is a fundamental act for women in order to go against stereotypes, and social media represent the place in which this act can be even more immediate and wide-ranging. Qualeasha Wood and Erin M. Riley hack their artistic medium, which in both of the cases is weaving, to focus on important themes often considered taboo. Through this rebellious act, the two artists take control of their self-representation.

The third chapter focuses on the concept of filter as an additional surface that overlays the mask used as a method of self-representation, in order to further characterize the individual. Filters are seen as a means of image manipulation, allowing the subject to be represented not only according to aesthetic features but also by emotions and feelings that better outline their personality. They are thus viewed as instruments that help uncover more aspects of our personality. However, this is just one side of the coin. The ability to manipulate images at will is a potentially dangerous tool for those who are susceptible to societal stereotypes, especially regarding the female body. Instead of imposing one's subjectivity, filters often become a way to modify one's images, typically one's body, to meet society's demands. This is a dangerous phenomenon because it only fosters dissatisfaction and discontent among women, who experience these feelings from a young age, as they enter the social world. For these reasons, it is crucial not to be influenced by the masses and to hack the means to free oneself from constraints. The concept of hacking is at the base of Corinne Mazzoli's artistic practice. By examining her art production, I will show how it perfectly exemplifies the possibility of hacking the means of expression and take control of one's image. In particular, Mazzoli proposes the concept of the *counter-tutorial*: while the tutorial should teach something to the viewer, the counter-tutorial actually teaches nothing but, through a process of hacking, becomes a point of social critique or reflection on important themes.

In sum, this study aims to analyze the processes through which the contemporary context has evolved and reached the state we are experiencing, to identify the means at our disposal for self-representation, namely masks and filters. In this way, and especially regarding social profiles conceived as masks, it is important to identify its limits and constraints, to avoid conforming to the standard norms proposed by society, but rather to subvert them, thereby taking control of the means and our posts. Only in this way we can control our identity created online and express ourselves freely.

CHAPTER 1: THE SELFIE IS NOT THE HEIR TO THE THRONE OF PORTRAIT

For a long time, the face is the physical feature that has been considered able to individually define and set us apart from others. Being able to communicate emotions and feelings, it exposes our true selves. As a result, our facial features might be thought of as the main components that shape our image. But I think that the process of crafting our own image is a more complex one.

This thesis starts from the concept that the individual is not identified from his physiognomic features, but from all those elements that delineate the essence of his self. In this sense, it is therefore necessary to distinguish his true self, from the various ways through which he presents himself to the outside world, including, precisely, his face. These modes are the means through which the individual speaks about himself, and thus means through which he represents himself. These means of self-representation can come in various forms depending on the contexts: for example, in the real world one can represent himself by the face, in the digital world, however, by the social media profile. In the moment of self-representation, you can decide what and how to show so as to communicate what you intend to express at its best. For this reason, every form of self-representation can be seen as a mask, as it entails the dichotomy revealing/concealing. Depending on the context, each individual can choose what mask to wear and what significance load it with.

The thought of Emmanuel Lévinas aligns with this thesis:

The total otherness, by virtue of which a being is not related to enjoyment and presents itself from itself, does not come to light in the form of things through which they open to us. Indeed, under the form, things hide themselves. The surface can transform into the interior: one can melt the metal of things to create new objects, use the wood of a crate to make a table, planing, sawing, breaking into pieces: the hidden becomes open and the open becomes hidden. This consideration might seem naive – as if the interiority or essence of things that form hides should be taken in a spatial sense – but in reality, the depth of the thing can only mean its material, and the revelation of the material is essentially superficial¹.

He calls "volto"² something elusive, fleeting, that succeeds in escaping from thought: «The “volto” is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense, it could not be understood and therefore encompassed. Neither seen nor touched – for in the visual or tactile sensation, the identity of the self hides the otherness of the object which precisely becomes content»³. Thus, Lévinas' concept of "volto" corresponds to the essence of each of us, to that self that cannot be grasped except in the moment of self-representation. This "volto" shows itself (and is grasped) only when it assumes a

¹ Lévinas, Emmanuel, *Totalità e infinito. Saggio sull'esteriorità*, Jaca Books, Milano 1980, p.196

² The translation of the word “volto” in English is “face”, but I choose to maintain the Italian word because Lévinas load it with a specific significance, which is different from the meaning in the dictionary.

³ Emmanuel Lévinas, 1980, op. cit., p.199

form. The surface that transforms into the interior, as Levinas speaks of, is nothing but the mask: depending on the form it assumes, it reveals certain characteristics of the person and conceals others. Indeed, Lévinas also states that «art gives things a facade, thanks to which objects are not only seen but are like objects that make a display of themselves»⁴. In this context, by art, I mean all those modes of self-representation that allow the self to become concrete so that it can be seen. The mask is the tool that make possible the dialogue between the interior and the exterior of a person. In other words, the mask is identified in the *fold* that, according to Deleuze, causes «the space of the inside to be topologically in contact with the space of the outside»⁵. In the moment of self-representation, we create this fold in order to represent us, as a result of an internalization. When the self assumes a mask, it can not only be seen, but it is putting itself on display.

So, even in moments of self-representation, we can choose what we want to show or conceal. But, choosing to represent ourselves highlight somethings and hiding other things doesn't mean that the resulting representation is lacking of truth. The fact that we have the possibility to choose what to show and what to conceal represent, instead, a means of power over who we are. Instead of thinking that showing/concealing represent an occasion to hide the truth, I think that it is instead a tool to represent us in a more truthful way. For example, in the literature, I think that Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*⁶ presents a plot, in which the protagonists are precisely two masks through which the subject can represent himself. In the book, in fact, the protagonist gains immortality, and thus, his face remains young, while only his portrait ages. The mask-portrait, in this case, reveals the wrinkles and all the other signs of the passage of time, while the mask-face hides them. The two masks refers both to the same subject and both preserve their own truth, revealing/concealing different things in order to represent the subject as he wishes.

In common opinion, often the mask is seen as something that hides the truth, but the definition of mask presented in this thesis departs from these negative views. In this regard, Hans Belting explains that «it was only from the Enlightenment onwards that we became accustomed to denying this common iconic character and to considering face and mask as opposites: the former would be the image of the self; the latter, instead, a falsification of the self»⁷. In reality, it is evident that face and mask cannot be considered as two opposing concepts, but rather, they overlap. Allowing these two ideas to collide, we can perceive the face as a mask that allows us to reflect and display our self. The mask, therefore, becomes the surface that reveals our image. Indeed, as Levi-Strauss highlights, it is impossible to separate the mask that conceals from the one that reveals, because «all masks are both

⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, 1980, op. cit., p.197

⁵ Deleuze, Gilles, *Foucault*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1987

⁶ Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Penguin, London 2009

⁷ Belting, Hans, *Facce. Una storia del volto*, Garocci editore, Roma 2014, p.31

at the same time»⁸. The mask then is that surface which, by letting us decide what to show and what to hide, allows us to give materiality and make tangible our being.

In the pages that follow, the term mask identifies, for me, that transparent and intangible surface between our true being and the external world, thus serving as the surface that allows us to connect ourselves to society and express ourselves. In other words, it is a membrane, a screen interposed between the self and the world. This is somewhat reminiscent of theater, where the mask was traditionally seen as that which allowed characters to have a voice and a gaze; with the face being ephemeral and fleeting, hence difficult to capture, the mask comes into play, once again allowing the face to be fixed and expressed⁹. Not coincidentally, the word “person” comes from the Latin “persona”, a word of Etruscan origin that originally meant “theatrical mask”¹⁰. The presence of masks is precisely one of the characteristics of Greek theater. It assumed different roles:

The mask certainly has a connection with the religious origin of tragedy. In primitive societies to the mask compete indeed an obvious ritual function, it allows one to become other than oneself (animal, monster, god, hero, etc.). If tragedy originates under the banner of Dionysus - god of wine and drunkenness there cannot but be a capital relationship with the theme of the transformation of the actor into another character. It is clear, however, that the mask also has a practical function, it facilitates the identification of the actor with the character, even more necessary in a theater that certainly reached 15,000 spectators [...]¹¹.

Thus, just as in the theater, the mask allows to self-represent in multiple contexts and instantly and plainly convey feelings and moods to the public. The mask, depending on the context, can take various forms: the face, the portrait, the photograph, the social profile are all different representations in terms of the medium used, yet the same in terms of the concept expressed. As the time goes by, the modes of self-representing changed, so the various masks that one can use evolved, based on technological developments. In this chapter, I intend to investigate how these changes occur and how they influence the modes of self-representation.

⁸ Interviewed in occasion of the Masques exhibition, hosted in 1960 at the Musée Guimet di Parigi

⁹ Hans Belting, 2014, op. cit., p.16

¹⁰ According to the etymological dictionary (<http://www.etimo.it/?term=persona&find=Cerca>), the Latin by the term “person” meant the wooden mask worn on stage by the actors in the theaters of ancient Greece and Italy, in which the facial features were exaggerated, in order to be better detected by spectators and the mouth was made in such a way as to make the sound of the voice louder.

¹¹ Alonge, Roberto, Perrelli, Franco, *Storia del teatro e dello spettacolo*, De Agostini Scuola SpA, Novara 2015, p.6

1.1 Methods of Self-Representation Over Time

The dilemma of the image as a true reflection of the self or as a falsification of the ego was not a concern when self-representation was based on traditional portraits. This issue has become more pronounced with the advent of digital technology, as the proliferation of images and their extreme accessibility to anyone have caused a loss of faith in the veracity of the face and its representations (as well as of representation in broad term).

The tools for self-representation have evolved over time, and consequently, so has the discourse around the reliability of these media. The portrait was the earliest means of self-representation utilized. It originated with the value of a true document and the legal authority of a testament; subsequently, portraits were used to show the social status of the individual portrayed. Over time, it became a way to evaluate the artist's ability to represent the subject's expressiveness. During the Renaissance, for instance, portraits were commissioned by nobles and wealthy merchants to affirm their social status and crystallise their image for posterity.



Figure 1: Piero della Francesca, *The Duke and Duchess of Urbino Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, 1473-1475 c., Oil on wood, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/aiva/46388716205>)

After that, the camera took over, because photography was capable of representing reality in a way at once more direct and quick. The development of the *carte de visite* made it possible for a larger number of people (including those of lower social classes) to have their portraits taken, as these images were smaller and therefore more economical photographs.



Figure 2: André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri, uncut Carte de Visite (Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/32535532@N07/6125201227>)

However, it was the advent of digital cameras that further simplified the process of obtaining photographs, making it accessible to everyone, not just those who practiced photography as a profession or a passion because convergence allowed for cameras to be integrated to multifunction devices (i.e. mobile screen devices, eventually developed into our smart phones) and thus everyone owning a MSD¹² to also have and carry a camera to use everywhere, anytime.

Edgar Gomez Cruz and Eric T. Meyer, in *Creation and Control in the Photographic Process: iPhones and the Emerging Fifth Moment of Photography*¹³, identify four main stages in the history of photography and propose a fifth stage, where mobile phones lead innovations in the photographic field, particularly exemplified by the iPhone. During the first stage, when the initial inventions related to photographic instruments emerged, creating images required a series of technical skills. With the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839, Louis Daguerre paved the way for a new method of capturing images. It required long exposure times and the use of chemicals to develop the image, making it accessible only to those with the necessary skills and resources. The introduction of the calotype by

¹² Abbreviation for mobile screen device.

¹³ Cruz, Edgar Gomez, Meyer, Eric T., "Creation and Control in the Photographic Process: iPhones and the emerging fifth moment of photography", in *Photographies*, n.5(2), 2012, pp. 203-221

William Henry Fox Talbot simplified and made photographic processes more economical, allowing for greater dissemination of the photographic method. However, these techniques still required a deep knowledge of the medium being used and were not yet accessible to the masses. Additionally, the use and distribution of photographs were not yet sufficiently developed. The second and third stages are characterized by the evolution of the photographic medium, leading to a true revolution in the use of photography, which becomes a public domain. A mass market began to take shape thanks to new technologies related to the medium and photographic processes: taking photos became easier, cameras lighter and smaller, and distribution channels began to clearly delineate. As photography became increasingly accessible, it became more necessary to emphasize the difference between professionals and amateurs, not in terms of equipment and technique but in terms of style. This difference was also reflected in the modes of use and distribution: for amateurs, photography was a way to capture family and friends' moments to share with loved ones, while for professionals, it was an art form directed at newspapers, magazines, and art galleries. The advent of George Eastman's Kodak in 1888 marks the birth of personal photography, a type of photography that, without too many pretenses, distanced itself from the professional field to become available on the mass market.



Figure 3: “You press the button, we do the rest”, Kodak campaign for the Brownie model (Source: <https://timelessmoon.getarchive.net/amp/media/you-press-the-button-we-do-the-rest-kodak-c5cf94>)

Sonja Vivienne and Jean Burgess explain that «Kodak taught much of the world not only that anyone could and should take photographs, but also where, when, and how to take them, in relation to shifting ideological constructions of modernity, leisure, domesticity, and gender»¹⁴. Kodak marked the time

¹⁴ Burgess, Jean, Vivienne, Sonja, “The remediation of the personal photograph and the politics of Self-Representation in digital storytelling”, in *Journal of material culture* , n.18(3), 2013, p.282

when anyone could take pictures. The fact that the photographic process was being expanded to the masses also changed the ways in which pictures were taken, which even in the amateur field were no longer limited to capturing family and party scenes.

With the advent of digital technology in the fourth period, the way of doing photography was completely transformed, both in format, as they switched from physical media to electronic media, and in the methods of showing and distribution, thanks to the advent of the internet. The camera thus became something everpresent in everyone's daily lives, as taking, sharing, and showing images became accessible to everyone. As only briefly anticipated, this transformation was amplified by the advent of mobile phones; it is with this event that the two scholars identify the fifth stage. Phones are technological innovations in which multiple services converge simultaneously, but the feature that the market focused on was the ability to take photos easily at any time of day; indeed, Steve Jobs presented the iPhone 4 as «a beautiful old Leica Camera»¹⁵.

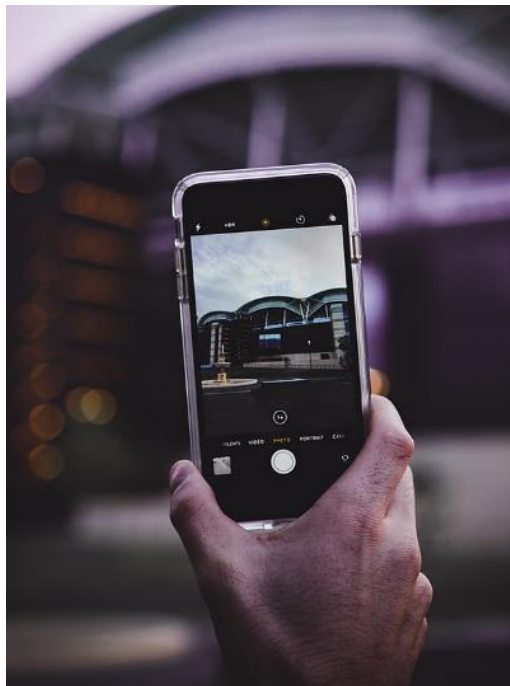


Figure 4: iPhone shooting a photograph (Source: <https://www.pickpik.com/phone-iphone-iphone-camera-mobile-photography-hand-stadium-113227>)

Taking photos has no per-shot cost, internet connectivity allows for immediate sharing with anyone, and the light and small design make phones easy to carry at all times, becoming essentials for everyday life. For Edgar Gomez Cruz and Eric T. Meyer, the iPhone is more than just a phone that combines multiple technologies; it is the node of different networks: it brings together the making,

¹⁵ While presenting the new iPhone 4 on June 7, 2010, Steve Jobs said: «You gotta see this in person. This is beyond the doubt, the most precise thing, and one of the most beautiful we've ever made. Glass on the front and back, and steel around the sides. It's like a beautiful old Leica camera. »

processing, and distribution of images. Another fundamental aspect is the ability to modify photos. Through social networks like Instagram and specialized apps, photos can be manipulated at will before being shared. As they explain:

Like a chameleon, an iPhone camera can emulate or simulate a black and white camera, different kinds of Lomo, a pinhole camera, and many others using software. It serves as a platform between companies developing applications and users of them, and, even more, it is a social tool based on image sharing and showing, making computer-mediated social interactions more visual every day. Therefore, we suggest that we are witnessing a generalized fifth moment of photography, that of complete mobility, ubiquity, and connection¹⁶.

The advent of digital photography and social media has turned photography into an ongoing performance where each shot that is posted serves as a means of self-representation and showcasing oneself to the public.

Hence, the fifth stage is thus characterized by the Web 2.0, with the creation of platforms and services that facilitate and encourage the networked sharing of user-created content. Reflecting on what Sonja Vivienne and Jean Burgess explain about online platforms,

Via user-created content networks and social network sites, the everyday lives of individuals are being remediated into new contexts of social visibility and connection—through Facebook and Twitter status updates, videos uploaded to YouTube, and photos contributed to Flickr; and, increasingly, through the ways that smartphones afford instant sharing of mobile snapshots with one's social networks via SMS, Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter¹⁷.

This mode of consuming photos reflects the dynamic and participatory character of digital platforms, where images are constantly created, altered, and shared. Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are some of a few platforms that have opened up new spaces for sharing and viewing photos, turning them into vehicles for expression and dialogue. Images are no longer just personal memories but become ways to build and display one's social identity. Through the use of phones, our way of expressing ourselves changes: to communicate who we are and thus create our image, we use new means, such as tweets, status updates, and photo posts. The use of phones has transformed the codes of social interaction, modifying how we behave within society and thus experience everyday life.

The difference in the approach to this new technology lies in what Heidi Rae Cooley defines as fit, that «particular relationship that exists between users and their mobile screenic devices»¹⁸. The way we look at the world around us changes because the hand (with which we hold the phone)

¹⁶ Edgar Gomez Cruz, Eric T. Meyer, "Creation and Control in the Photographic Process: iPhones and the emerging fifth moment of photography", p.217

¹⁷ Jean Burgess, Sonja Vivienne, 2013, op. cit., p.284

¹⁸ Cooley, Heidi Rae, "It's all about the fit: The hand, the mobile screenic device and tactile vision", in *Journal of Visual Culture*, n.3(2), 2014, p.135

becomes an integral and active element in vision. It is a tactile vision that no longer limits itself to what the eyes see but is based on the fusion between the hand and the mobile screenic device, which become one. According to Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym, «social media viewers tend to consume visual material not by gazing (as one would at a traditional film shown in a cinema), nor by glancing (as one might do with a television turned on in a room), but in a segmented and tactile manner: grabbing»¹⁹. In this perspective, the narrative according to which technology overwhelms us looks a little outdated; it entails instead a reciprocal exchange, where «fit presupposes a continuous merging, or becoming-one of hand and mobile screenic device; the experience is one that is dynamic and always happening»²⁰. Pushing Marshall McLuhan famous statement according to which media are extensions of man²¹, observing the contemporary MSD, phones become an extension of our arm, and not only that: vision becomes an extension of the screen. Our way of experiencing what surrounds us changes because «the particularity of the everyday emerges to fascinate or startle or shock momentarily before dissipating not the experience of fit and returning to the seeing of interface. It is in this way that vision becomes tactile»²². Therefore, the screen can be seen as the surface through which we perform ourselves: the (photographic) self-portrait is presented and viewed through the said screen, which allows for the development of processes of identification and subjectification. The screen thus confirms itself as the mask of who we are: indeed, as theorist Craig Owens states «the subject poses as an object in order to be a subject»²³. This means that a subject must assume a mask to be photographed, and so to be seen.

The Polaroid camera can be considered as the one paving the way for the phone and digital photographs: the Polaroid is nothing more than the analog version of digital camera or phone shots, as both types of photography are characterized by immediacy. Polaroids were born as easy-to-use and portable cameras (because of their lightness), and it is precisely this characteristic that determined their widespread use and diffusion even among non-professional photographers. The only action required was to press the button, and the photograph would develop itself. This is exactly what we do now with digital cameras, and even better with our phones. The consequence of this high immediacy is the ability to present and view the photograph right away, which is another element shared with digital photography: once taken, the photo goes into the gallery and can be promptly viewed. But here digital photography takes a step further: not only the photo can be viewed by those present, but also

¹⁹ Senft, Theresa M., Baym, Nancy K., "What does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon", in *International Journal of Communication*, n.9, 2015, p.1598

²⁰ Heidi Rae Cooley, 2014, op. cit., p.143

²¹ McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*, The MIT Press, London 1994

²² Heidi Rae Cooley, 2014, op. cit., p.151

²³ Owens, Craig, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992, p.215

by everyone who accesses the online platform where it was uploaded. At this point, it seems evident to state that the Polaroid was the precursor to what digital photographs are today, and consequently, also to the selfie. According to Alise Tifentale, «the selfie can be interpreted as an emerging sub-genre of self-portraiture, as an example of the digital turn in vernacular photography as well as a side product of the recent technological developments»²⁴.

1.2 The Selfie in the Age of the Networked Photography

In 2013, Oxford Dictionaries declared "selfie" as the International Word of the Year, defining it as «a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website»²⁵. This definition highlights the centrality of the individual in the act of photographic self-representation. The selfie has grown to be a commonplace social media phenomenon, serving as a platform for individuals to communicate with one another, share personal experiences, and express their identities. The key features that define a photograph as a selfie include: the subject facing the camera frontally, the proximity of the lens to the subject, the subject being photographed and the photographer being the same person, and the subject's awareness of being photographed. However, the definition of selfie might be more complex than suggested by traditional criteria. Matthew Bellinger's analysis²⁶ of a picture that the former UK Prime Minister David Cameron shared on Twitter in 2014²⁷ has stimulated reflection on new guidelines for what constitutes a selfie. In fact, the image in question has been labeled as a selfie by the major newspapers, even though lacking the previously mentioned criteria: the subject's gaze is not directed towards the camera, the individual appears unaware of being photographed, and it is evident that the photo was taken by a third party rather than by the minister himself. Thus, there are other characteristics that we look for in a photo in order to categorize it as a selfie. The crucial elements to distinguish a selfie from a simple personal photo are twofold: staging and shareability. The Prime Minister picture have both, because he is performing a pose, and the selfie was shared on Twitter. On the staging characteristic, the photo must be taken for a specific purpose and with the intention of displaying and communicating a particular fact or message. The shot is studied and conceived to convey a certain mood, emotion, or event. Therefore, it is a non-visual characteristic.

²⁴ Tifentale, Alise, "The Selfie: Making Sense of the 'Masturbation of Self-Image' and the 'Virtual Mini-Me'", in *Selfiecity*, 2014, <https://selfiecity.net/#theory>

²⁵ <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/>

²⁶ Bellinger, Matthew, "Selfies| Bae caught me tweetin': On the representational stance of the selfie", in *International Journal of Communication*, n.9, 2015, pp.1806-1817

²⁷ https://x.com/David_Cameron/status/441306815733579776

The second characteristic, perhaps more noteworthy, is already evident in the definition proposed by Oxford Dictionaries: the construction of the self through selfies depends not only on framing or facial expression but also on the context in which the photo is shared and viewed, and thus on its shareability within certain online platforms. Once the photo is taken, the act of publishing and sharing it with a wider or narrower audience is an integral part of the shot. It is no longer just about taking a simple photograph but about showing others what one desires. This is what changes with the advent of the selfie: they are part of an online network of interactions, where everyone is encouraged to comment, share, and react to others' photos. In this regard, Gabriella Giannachi defines the selfie as

consisting of a representation of a self at a particular time and the sharing of how that representation is experienced, either as an image or, by association through the addition of a tag and/or hashtag, as a reference to a larger body of images. In this sense, the selfie is a form of photographic self-portrait but also a dissemination and communication strategy aimed at constructing the subject in the form of an image that others will see and experience²⁸.

The context in which the image is published influences its features: selfies possess their own content, but this must be located within the characteristics shared by all the images that are published within the community to which that selfie belongs. In this way, selfies express membership in a particular virtual community of users. As a result, the user acquires a *connected presence* within the community that creates a «link between presence construction practices, also found in self-portraiture, and dissemination and communication strategies, related to selfies»²⁹. What distinguishes selfies, then, is not only their interconnectedness and presence on social media, but the fact that they are shot so that others can take part in them. Not coincidentally, one of Instagram's latest updates involves posting pictures with a banner on which it says “your turn”: for example, by posting a picture with my dog, my followers are invited to interact with it and click on the banner to also share a picture with their pets.

For these reasons [the selfie] can best capture how we wish to represent ourselves in the economy of experience, being at once a construction of a present (in time), a presence (or a set of relations in space and time) and a representation (an image or object to be disseminated) of a self that is constantly shifting and expanding in an emerging and ever-changing multitude, with increasing social and economic value³⁰.

The selfie is formed as a result of a relationship between the self and the network, which defines also its characteristics. Adam Levin argues that «as a result of this imperative, the selfie is not a self-

²⁸ Giannachi, Gabriella, *Technologies of the Self-Portrait: Identity, Presence and the Construction of the Subject(s) in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Art*, Routledge, London 2023, p. 222

²⁹ Ivi, 233

³⁰ Ivi, p. 234

portrait in the strict sense of the word, but rather the representation of the self as a product of the system of interpersonal relationships through which it is articulated online»³¹. Therefore, photography is no longer a personal act but a public one, through which it becomes simple to share oneself (who one is, what one does, and what one thinks) with others. Adam Levin asserts that «the fissure between the phenomenal experience and digital interaction originates in the translation of the former into the latter»³². This is the secret that lets us figure out when the actual turning point happens in the context of the selfie and, by extension, in the social context as well. The new modes of photography and their sharing on platforms are indivisible: each medium of mediation involves a mode of transmission, and one influences the other in an endless reciprocal relationship. Therefore, the birth and development of the selfie phenomenon are attributed not only to the new technologies in the field of digital photography and smartphones but also to the presence of sites and platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. In this way, the selfie becomes a means through which to present oneself within a broader audience, which is what is created on online platforms. As Paul Frosh suggests, «the selfie is the progeny of digital networks. Its distinctiveness from older forms of self-depiction seems to derive from non-representational changes: innovations in distribution, storage, and metadata that are not directly concerned with the production or aesthetic design of images»³³. He defines the selfie as a "gestural image": selfies are located within techno-cultural circuits that connect individuals' bodies and their mobility through physical and informational spaces, and the micro-bodily hand and eye movements used to interact with digital devices.

The selfie appropriates and innovates upon the core terms of photography, which are indexicality, composition, and reflection. By combining two types of indexicality, index as a trace and index as deixis, it emphasizes the concept that the photographer and the subject of the photo coincide in the same person; thus, the act of extending one's arm to take a photo becomes both mediating and mediated. In this sense, regarding composition as based on the division between seeing and being seen, «the space of photographic production or enunciation is effortlessly unified with the space of the picture itself, and not photographing oneself as a part of an event or scene becomes an aesthetic, social, political, and moral choice»³⁴. Furthermore, if before the advent of the selfie it was challenging to view a photograph as a reflective mirror, the inclusion of cameras in phones has made it possible to create and view an image that effectively corresponds to what one would see in a mirror

³¹ Levin, Adam, "The Selfie in the Age of Digital Recursion", in *InVisible Culture: An electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, n.20, 2014, <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/the-selfie-in-the-age-of-digital-recursion/>, p.16

³² Ivi, p.3

³³ Frosh, Paul, "Selfies | The gestural image: the selfie, photography theory, and kinesthetic sociability", in *International Journal of Communication*, n.9, 2015 p.1607

³⁴ Ivi, p.1612

if positioned in front of it. In other words, the selfie modifies the manner in which we might represent ourselves on a regular basis, as it functions as a tool of mediated, embodied sociability. Consequently, the selfie is essentially a «hybrid phenomenon that merges the aesthetic of photographic self-portraiture with the social functions of online communication»³⁵. It is more than just an image, it includes a series of metadata, which fall into three categories: automatically-generated data, data added by the user, and data added by other users.

While taking photos with Polaroids was viewed positively because it allowed for capturing the moment and preserving the memory of certain experiences, selfies were initially seen in a negative light: not merely as representations, but as exhibitions of the self, highlighting societal deterioration and the loss of moral values. The selfie is considered an act of narcissism, a tool to control the image others have of us, an act of self-adulation. Adjectives such as self-centered, narcissistic, and contrived have always been associated with it. Turning the camera towards oneself creates what Rosalind Krauss defines a condition of narcissism, transforming object-libido into ego-libido. She theorizes narcissism as the medium of video, because although it depends on a set of physical mechanism, she rather prefers to investigate the medium in a psychological model. The two elements that she takes into account are «the simultaneous reception and projection of an image and the human psyche used as a conduit»³⁶. These two features can be observed not only in videos, but also in still photographs, such as precisely selfies. According to Krauss it is the centering that determine the narcissism: «The body is therefore as it were centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which re-projects the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror»³⁷. This concept can also be applied to all the images taken with a MSD: the subjects of the photo, who, in the case of selfies, coincides with the subject taking the photo, is at the center between the camera framing him and the screen in which he can reflect himself. The centering of the subject is what determines the narcissism. However, as previously explained, selfies can only be considered as such if they are shared with others, and it is this characteristic of shareability that frees them from narcissism. As Amelia Jones states, «the performance of the self is not self-sustaining or coherent within itself, not a pure, unidirectional show of individual agency, but always contingent on otherness»³⁸. Similarly, Rob Horning asserts that

³⁵ Tifentale, Alise, *The Selfie: More and Less than a Self-Portrait*, in Moritz Neumüller, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Photography and Visual Culture*, Routledge, New York 2018, p.45

³⁶ Krauss, Rosalind, "The Aesthetic of Narcissism", in *October*, n.1, 1976, p.52

³⁷ Ivi, p.52

³⁸ Jones, Amelia, "The Eternal Return: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment", in *Signs*, 27(4), 2002, p.971

«selfies are not solipsistic; they are only selfies if they circulate»³⁹. When we take a selfie, it is done in order to share it with others; thus, it cannot be a narcissistic act because it includes the desire to see oneself reflected in the phones of others. While some view the selfie as an expression of narcissism and superficiality, here I want to consider it as a means of creative expression and social connection.

What cannot be denied is that there is a bit of vanity in the act of taking a selfie. Being a medium that puts the subject at the forefront and pointing the spotlight on himself, it actually works out to be a highly performative medium. For these reasons, the selfie amplifies the phenomenon of self-branding, which is the process of emphasizing one's unique attributes to more effectively "sell oneself" better in the marketplace. It is a very performative tool that allows us to gain a sort of social capital and strengthen our reputation by making us visible and maybe influencing. However, this can be a double-edged sword, because we have the power to decide how precisely we want to define ourselves. In the contemporary visual cultures, the expression of one's own identity is crucial, and, if we learn to use properly the many tools that the internet provides us, it almost comes naturally to us. But this abundance of means and freedom must make us understand that this is as powerful as it is dangerous: it allows us to show ourselves as we are and as we want to be seen, meaning that it is up to us to decide which mask to use. Returning to the concept of the mask discussed earlier, since it is an in-built characteristic of the mask the one of reveal or hide certain characteristics, it will not perfectly coincide with the essence of oneself. It is a surface that allows us to create a bridge to the inner self of a person, but as each of us can decide on the modes of self-representation, it will reveal only some sides of it. The fact that the mask doesn't necessarily coincide in his entirely with the "volto" doesn't signify that it lacks of truth. The reliability and truthfulness of a selfie could be attributed to the unaffectedness of the pose, or its spontaneity, or the (seemingly) absence of filters or manipulations, but in reality, it is not so. These are characteristics concerning the way in which we shoot the selfie, and even if they say a lot about the intentions with which the shot was taken, they aren't responsible for the reliability of the selfie. What allow us to trust a selfie is the fact that the person taking it is in complete control of the medium, and therefore will be able to show themselves in the way they think is right. The result is that the Internet represents a space in which we can freely portray and present ourselves every day. It can be considered a non-place; according to Adam Levin, «as a result, the internet evinces a similar suspension of established civic mores as seen in the traveling carnival or festival, during which traditional roles are abandoned and new ones are assumed through the mask and rite»⁴⁰. The mask is an essential part of this non-place because within it, the mask

³⁹ Horning, Rob, "Selfies without the self", in *The new inquiry*, 2014, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/selfies-without-the-self/>

⁴⁰ Adam Levin, 2014, op. cit., p.21

embodies the way we self-represent. The selfie, but not only that is nothing but the mask we wear in the virtual world (just as our face is in the real world): it allows us to explore our identity, express it in all its facets, and attest to its evolution over time.

1.3 Towards the Erasure of the Face

From this brief and swift journey along the timeline exploring the evolution of representational methods, it becomes clear that the face plays a central role in self-representation and thus in producing an image that is faithful to our being. Particularly in the digital age, governed by the internet and new technologies, the selfie becomes the medium that handles this type of representation. According to Jenna Wortham, «selfies have become the catchall term for digital self-portraits abetted by the explosion of cellphone cameras and photo-editing and sharing services»⁴¹. The study conducted by Saeideh Bakhshi, David A. Shamma, and Eric Gilbert on different types of photo content posted on Instagram⁴² reinforces the concept of the selfie as the main method of self-representation online, demonstrating that «photos with faces are 38% more likely to receive likes and 32% more likely to receive comments, even after controlling for social network reach and activity»⁴³. However, for the purposes of my thesis, what matters is not how many interactions a photo may receive after being uploaded to online platforms, but rather whether or not it can faithfully represent the person who is self-portraying.

This thesis aims to debunk the myth, according to which it is the selfie the best self-representation. The intention is not to prove that the face does not represent us, as that would be misleading, but to emphasize that to represent ourselves, we can no longer rely solely on that single medium, as there are many elements to consider. Casey N. Cep asserts that «rarely a documentary genre, self-portraiture has always allowed us to craft an argument about who we are, convincing not only others, but also ourselves»⁴⁴. In the moment we decide to self-represent ourselves, we don't simply do it for documentary purposes, so we don't limit ourselves to a merely representation of our

⁴¹ Wortham, Jenna, "My Selfie, Myself", in *The New York Times*, 2013,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/20/sunday-review/my-selfie-myself.html>

⁴² The study conducted by these scholars investigates one of the most common types of photo content shared on social media: photos of people. They used a corpus of one million Instagram images and organized the study around two social engagement factors, likes and comments. The aim was to study how the presence of a face, its age and gender might impact social engagement on the photo.

⁴³ Bakhshi, Saeideh, Gilbert Eric, Shamma David, Ayman, "Faces engage us: photos with faces attract more likes and comments on Instagram", at *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings*, 2014, pp. 965

⁴⁴ Cep, Casey N., "In Praise of Selfies", in *Pacific Standard*, 2013, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/in-praise-of-selfies-from-self-conscious-to-self-constructive-62486>

face, our body, our physical features with selfies, but we go beyond them, focusing also on the more introspective aspects, which we believe are the ones that most distinguish us. The *Selfiecity* project⁴⁵, conducted by the Software Studies Initiative at The Graduate Center, City University of New York, demonstrates that only 4% of all images shared on Instagram are selfies⁴⁶. This shows that the selfie is just one of the many screenic gestures that are part of our daily lives and fall within what Darren Berkland defines as the screen-sphere⁴⁷. The concept of screen-sphere was elaborated as a result of the transformation of the screen into something ubiquitous, interconnected and mobile. Experiencing the screen-sphere means to embody the merging between the screen and the space. In this realm, «the selfie is a fascinating example of a gesture unique to today's screenic topology, but it is not the only one that should be read as embodied within this constellation»⁴⁸. It is limiting and reductive to believe that our faces alone (and so, our selfies) are adequate for self-representation. Indeed, if we delve into the distant roots of each of us, we can see that, especially in children, the impulse for self-representation is not expressed through the representation of one's figure but is instead shifted to other objects and situations.

Milan Kundera, in a passage from his novel *Immortality*, states:

Imagine living in a world without mirrors. You would dream and imagine your face as an external reflection of what you have inside. Then, at forty, someone shows you a mirror for the first time in your life. Imagine the shock! You would see a completely unfamiliar face. And you would clearly understand what you cannot now comprehend: you are not your face⁴⁹.

Indeed, if we were to close our eyes, we would realize that we would have difficulty precisely delineating our physiognomy, especially the features of our face, as we do not have a direct and continuous perception of it. We would realize that what emerges is an internal image, which transcends from a physiognomic fidelity. This internal image does not concern itself with the physiognomy of our body, as it is the result of a series of figurative and non-figurative elements. It is, therefore, an image constituted by a series of layers of elements ranging from the perception of one's body to that of one's emotions. This internal image is nothing more than an ideal image of what we are: an image that encompasses all those physical and non-physical attributes that we believe that

⁴⁵ *Selfiecity* is a research study led by Lev Manovich, concerning selfies shared on Instagram. They were used 3200 selfies shared during one week in 2013 from five global cities in all continents (Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, Sao Paulo). Consisting of a comparative reading of selfies from different cities, the aim was to quantify cultural difference and translate it into concepts that can be measured and calculated by software.

⁴⁶ Tifentale, Alise, 2018, op. cit., p.50

⁴⁷ Berkland, Darren Gary, "Selfie-screen-sphere: Examining the selfie as a complex, embodying gesture", in *Necsus*, n.8(2), 2019, pp. 263-283

⁴⁸ Ivi, p.276

⁴⁹ Kundera, Milan, *L'immortalità*, Adelphi, Milano 1990

determine who we are, and therefore represent the image of ourselves to show to others. It is an image that also encompasses the essence of our soul, aiming to represent externally what we are internally: it must reflect our inner characteristics, such as our sensitivity and intelligence. It is about showing what we feel, rather than what we are. Therefore, our face alone cannot succeed in completely expressing a comprehensive image of what we are, of our true self.

The concept according to which our faces are not enough to completely express who we are is the main concept explaining why I think we are going toward an erasure of the face while self-representing. Especially in the digital era, it is not only the features of our face that represent us and our emotions and ideas. Rather, there are plenty of other elements that might determine a better representation of who we are and, in the perspective of self-sharing, how we want to be understood by others. For example, every time a person decides how to dress, style their hair, apply makeup, adopt a pose or expression, they decide to present themselves to others in a certain way, with a certain image. For Roland Barthes⁵⁰, the photographic act is not the representation of a face, but the trace of a real life. We use various types of photos to leave a trace, a clue of what we are. Relying on multiple images, of different kinds, allows us to represent ourselves in the most complete (and truthful) way possible, especially because online identity does not depend on visual characteristics. It is not our face, nor any other physical characteristic, that represents us. Our interests, thoughts, ways of behaving are what characterize us and collaborate to make a faithful autobiography. According to Giacomo di Giorgio,

inserted into the environment of one or more social networks, these self-portraits nullify their figurative nature, transforming into pure traces and remnants of a passage: the context in which they were taken and the social environment in which they are disseminated matter more than the (self)depicted subject⁵¹.

This statement makes one wonder whether the selfie succeeds in representing what is important about a person's characteristics. It would be a mistake to seek a complete self-portrait in a selfie, because it is only one of the many tools that online platforms allow for self-expression. Instead, we focus on everything we deem important, that captures our attention and that we think can express what we want to say. In this sense, even objects that usually go unnoticed can be part of the narrative that we weave in order to create our autobiography through images. Susan Murray speaks of a new aesthetic «dedicated to the exploration of the urban eye and its relation to decay, alienation, kitsch, and its ability to locate beauty in the mundane», stating that «some have claimed that it is indeed a

⁵⁰ Barthes, Roland, *La camera chiara: nota sulla fotografia*, Einaudi, Torino 2003

⁵¹ Di Foggia, Giacomo, Location of #selfie, paper presented at the *International Conference. Photography and Visual Cultures in the 21st Century: Italy and the Iconic turn*, Roma 2014

new category of photography, called ephemera»⁵². This concept gives rise to what is known as vernacular photography: the photography of everyday life. Indeed, in their study concerning the photos posted by Instagram users⁵³, Yuheng Hu, Lydia Manikonda, and Subbarao Kambhampati explain that «Instagram photos can be roughly categorized into eight types based on their content: self-portraits, friends, activities, captioned photos (pictures with embedded text), food, gadgets, fashion, and pets, where the first six types are much more popular»⁵⁴.

The simple face no longer defines us, nor is it a single photo, but we must think of our image as a kind of container, where all these different kinds of self-representations are fragments that converge in it. It is only through this plurality of forms that an image of the self can be delineated doing justice to the complexity of the self. As Alice Cati posits in a reflection devoted to the new modes of self-representing in art and cinema, «the Self is by nature plural, lost, fragmented, and polysemous. This is why I prefer the notion of refraction to define the processes of audio-visual self-representation: the reflected image multiplies, is diverted, and is refracted thanks to the numerous surfaces that the subject encounters»⁵⁵. Self-representation is a complex and stratified process that cannot be limited to a single medium like the selfie. Although the face has always played a central role in our representation, today many elements are necessary to create a faithful and complete image of ourselves. Vernacular photography and the aesthetics of the everyday, as well as the different types of images we share on social media, contribute to building a plural and complex narrative of our identity. In this context, the selfie is just one of the many tools we use to express who we are, and the true portrait of ourselves emerges from the combination of all these representations.

All this becomes even easier to understand when contextualized in the contemporary world where all kind of photographs, selfies or not, are posted on social media, and particularly on Instagram. Alise Tifentale, in *Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self*⁵⁶, identifies two different categories of online photography: competitive and non-competitive photography. The ones that use non-competitive photography are those who, following the trend set by Polaroids, share

⁵² Murray, Susan, "Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics", in *Journal of Visual Culture*, n.7(2), 2008, p.155

⁵³ This study consists on a qualitative and quantitative analysis on Instagram, examining photo content to identify photo categories, types of active users and independence of user audience from shared photos.

⁵⁴ Hu, Yuheng, Manikonda, Lydia, Kambhampati, Subbarao, "What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types", in *Proceedings of the Eighth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, 2014, p. 595

⁵⁵ Cati, Alice, *Refractions of the Self. New Models of Self-Representation in Art and Cinema*, in Auteliano, Alice (a cura di), *The Cinematic Experience. Film, Contemporary Art, Museum*, Campanotto Editore, Pasian di Prato (UD) 2010, p.196

⁵⁶ Tifentale, Alise, Manovich, Lev, *Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self*, in Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, Sabine, Wirth, *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Analytical, and Theoretical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2018, pp.167-187

on social media (targeting their friends and family, so people they know) photographs of their family and personal experiences. Richard Chalfen⁵⁷ defines this type of photography as home mode photography. On the other hand, competitive photography identifies a new category of photographers that occupies the liminal space between avant-garde photography and amateur photography. Born after World War II, it «aimed at an audience consisting of a peer group of more or less like-minded photographers, and the images circulated within this group are discussed and evaluated primarily on the basis of the mastery of photographic technique, aesthetics, and creativity»⁵⁸. In this way, the photos posted on one's profile create a feed that is recognizable and unique to that specific user, in order that the posted photos will be evaluated based on their aesthetic statement. What is interesting is where the selfie fits within this category. *Selfiecify*, as mentioned above, debunked the belief that the selfie is the primary tool used by Instagram users, as in the cities investigated only 1/10 of the photos was a selfie⁵⁹. In this regard, Lev Manovich identifies a new genre used especially in competitive photography: the anti-selfie genre⁶⁰. In the anti-selfie genre, the photographer's face is not framed in the photo, yet these images still achieve the goal of showing participation in a situation or experience, thus making the feed a true autobiography. «The author of the Instagram account in a landscape or another space photographed by somebody else from the back [...] author's free hand pointing to a landscape or city [...] hands or other parts of the body as parts of an arrangement of objects⁶¹» are all examples of photographs that, although they do not show the user's face, help to create a narrative around the person and outline its personality: interests, feelings, and ideas. The person's identity is identified, even though their face is not the primary means used to do so. Sergio Giusti identifies us as

the first consumers of the same images we produce because we use them as building material for our virtual identity and reputation. We could even say that we view them with an eye that can be compared to that of a sort of curator of our own images. With the evident aim of emanating the overall image of ourselves that we deem most appropriate towards the virtual community. And this 'curatorial' attitude includes the choices of how to feed images to our feed or social media wall, choosing what to post or not⁶².

⁵⁷ Chalfen, Richard, *Snapshot versions of life*, Popular Press of Bowling Green State, Bowling Green 1987

⁵⁸ Tifentale, Alise, Manovich, Lev, *Competitive Photography and the Presentation of the Self*, p.173

⁵⁹ Ivi, p.187

⁶⁰ Ivi, pp.185-186

⁶¹ Ivi, p.188

⁶² Giusti, Sergio, "Immagine-atto/Immagine-arto: la fotografia come protesi tra performance e comportamento nell'era della condivisione con le fotocamere in rete", in *Mediascape Journal*, n.12, 2019, pp.27 (my translation)

1.4 The Missing Faces of Artists

When viewed through the lens of social media, the concept of the erasure of the face seems to be a relatively new idea. However, it is actually a phenomenon with a long tradition in both art history and personal representation. Even with the democratization of the creative process in the digital age, it is still easier to recognize the need for self-expression looking at the works of artists. Nowadays, everyone has access to numerous tools (such as the media examined in my thesis) that allow for self-representation and expression, regardless of one's artistic abilities. Prior to the accessibility of these media, those who were able to represent themselves, who possessed the tools to do so (namely their art), were indeed the artists.

Having established the concept that we are increasingly moving towards the erasure of the face, in the sense that it is paradoxically no longer important to depict ourselves through our physical features, but rather to go beyond them and favor a representation that best expresses our inner self, our emotions, and our thoughts, it is clear that a singular representation of our person is not feasible. Instead, everything that surrounds and interests us can be useful in creating an image that reflects as closely as possible our identity. This does not mean that everything can be considered a self-portrait. The genre of portraiture can transcend its boundaries, which are inherently unstable and imprecise. Regardless of how the image is finally depicted, the intention to reproduce one's own image is a necessary for classifying a representation as a self-portrait.

Projective identification is defined by Stefano Ferrari as a mechanism that permits the self-portrait to transcend its boundaries: «The mechanisms of (projective) self-identification can thus shift the focus of the self-portrait; and to the extent that the artist identifies with other objects, people, and situations, by representing those figures, he represents himself»⁶³. Van Gogh's artwork provides an example of how this process of projective self-identification operates. According to Franco Rella⁶⁴, Van Gogh's *Bedroom* (1888) is a self-portrait, where the urge to describe oneself goes beyond depicting one's own body, tending instead towards a representation of one's soul and psyche.

⁶³ Ferrari, Stefano, *Lo specchio dell'io. Autoritratto e psicologia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2006, pp.23-24

⁶⁴ Rella, Franco, *Negli occhi di Vincent Van Gogh: l'io nello specchio del mondo*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1998



Figure 5: Van Gogh, *Bedroom*, 1888, oil on canvas, Van Gogh museum, Amsterdam (Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/michelelovesart/3675898923>)

This work by Van Gogh, therefore, would be a portrait of his internal world, his way of suffering and experiencing emotions. Similarly to Van Gogh, this concept applies to many other works that more or less explicitly represent the true self of the artist, regardless of the presence of their actual body in the work. Among many, I choose three works of art that I think will help summarize in a more practical way the concepts expressed in this chapter.

The first one is *Self-Portrait* (1971) by Vincenzo Agnetti. Born in Milan in 1926, Agnetti graduated from Brera and then attended the Piccolo Teatro school. In all his works, the concealed, the forgotten memory becomes manifest art and delineates the fundamental characteristic of his entire artistic production. «Agnetti's works must be read within a double register: the work that speaks for itself, with the force of its visual essence and underlying interiority, and the critical-epistemological, punctual, methodical work that underpins it»⁶⁵. The work in question was identified by his daughter as symbolically representing the entire biographical and artistic journey of the artist. It is part of a series of works presented in February 1971 at the Galleria Blu in Milan, among which a series of felt and bakelite pieces stand out. *Self-Portrait* is one of the felts: panels engraved or painted with color that use the literary form to depict portraits and landscapes. In this case, the artist does not choose his face to represent and portray himself, but instead, it is replaced by the phrase "Quando mi vidi, non c'ero" (When I saw myself, I wasn't there). This work supports the thesis of the annulment of the

⁶⁵ <http://www.vincenzoagnetti.com/biografia.html>

face not only from a formal perspective but also from a conceptual perspective. The phrase that should represent his self, reveals instead his absence: when the artist looks at himself, so at his body, he does not find what he truly is. Agnetti does not recognize himself in his body, but in his way of creating art. It is no coincidence that his art is defined as “speech art”: an art that narrates sensations and states of mind through words and poetry, where the boundary between art and performance becomes increasingly thin, as writing and artwork merge into a single action, which is that of portraying⁶⁶. Another artistic process I want to focus on is that of Mirella Bentivoglio. A poet, artist, critic, curator, and leading figure in Italian and international visual-verbal research, she was born in Klagenfurt, Austria, in 1922⁶⁷. Her artistic practice too is based on the combined use of verbal language and image. From the 1960s onwards, she dedicated herself to a personal form of object-poetry, exploring the languages of performance, action-poetry, and environment-poetry. Moreover, she is an artist who has been highly active in the feminist field: many of her works emphasize the condition of women in society. Her works, rich in symbolism and metaphors, represent everyday objects and universal symbols to provoke profound and complex reflections. The photograph *IO (ME)* (1979) is considered the visual-verbal self-portrait of the artist. She herself defines it as follows:

As the French philosopher Simone Weil wrote, all that each of us truly possesses in this world is only the possibility of saying “I.” The image of our face does not contain our awareness, as all that each of us can know of our image is only the reflection in a mirror, or the product of an external diaphragm, like photography. Therefore, the true self-portrait of a visual artist, such as I am, can only consist of the brief word “I.” A diphthong that, for the present collage, I have identified in the image of my person. The upright position of any homo sapiens who wishes to self-pronounce with an alphabetical letter can only assimilate him to the written form of the vowel “i.” My face has coherently transformed into the dot that tops this letter in its lowercase form, and this has been achieved by superimposing a black egg over the image of my face. ... To complete the writing of the syllable “io,” my figure-letter “i” has joined the form of the letter “o,” itself an oval, flattened and fissured in the middle, as if to allow an exit, the birth of the person into the reality of the logos, a reality on which communication between human beings is founded⁶⁸.

Also in this example, the face disappears because it is overlaid with a black egg, that is an emblem of life, a cosmic symbol of perpetuity and origin. From the 1970s onwards, Mirella Bentivoglio became interested in self-representation, which also became a medium of self-assertion to express what it means to be a woman. The third work I intend to analyze is *Autobiography* (1980) by Sol LeWitt. He was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1928, and he’s considered one of the founding fathers of Conceptual Art. Favoring

⁶⁶ <https://artslife.com/2019/10/18/lazione-del-ritrarre-la-dialettica-di-vincenzo-agnetti-mostra-milano/>

⁶⁷ <https://mirellabentivoglio.it/>

⁶⁸ Giusti Galardi, Giovanna (ed.), *AUTORITRATTE. Artiste di capriccioso e destrissimo ingegno*, Florence, Edizioni Polistampa, 2010, p. 112

the predominance of the idea over the work itself that arises from it, he subverted the conventional rules of artistic practice and abolished the notions of uniqueness, unrepeatability, and individual skill. Studying his oeuvre, one can recognize the influence of Eadweard Muybridge's work⁶⁹ in the use of the serial element to indicate the passage of time or a narrative. The seriality of his artistic practice is found in *Autobiography*, where the photographic project and the display arrangement take shape over several pages. The photographs in question are more or less personal: they depict the interior of his New York loft filled with domestic knick-knacks, and in doing so, it is sometimes possible to glimpse the titles of some of his books or the labels of his cassette tapes. In this way, despite the absence of the artist's face or body, the photos taken manage to create a narrative that reveals features of his deep self. Moreover, the arrangement of the images on the page reminds us of the layout of images on Instagram feeds.

⁶⁹ Eadweard Muybridge (Kingston upon Thames, April 9, 1830 - Kingston upon Thames, May 8, 1904) was a British photographer and pioneer of movement photography.

CHAPTER 2: OUR INSTAGRAM FEED IS OUR AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Attempting to establish a sort of timeline regarding the methods of self-representation, the previous chapter highlighted how digital photography is currently the primary tool used for self-representation. The main characteristic of this medium is that it cannot be considered without acknowledging that, once a photo is taken, it will be uploaded on social media to be shared with a more or less wide audience. In this context, it is important to consider the means through which these photos are taken: these are tools "within everyone's reach", both in the sense that they are simple and intuitive to use and thus accessible to anyone without requiring particular skills, and in the sense that they are particularly manageable in terms of device and therefore easy to carry in daily life. This is especially true for mobile phones, which manage to encapsulate all the latest technologies in a small portable object. The particular fit that is established between the mobile screen device and the user causes a new way of looking and being looked at, in which the subject can not only self-represent using the various tools that technologies provide but also share the self-image they have created within the network of connections made possible by the Internet. In our contemporary interconnected reality, there are many tools available to the user to build their identity online: from the nickname to the published posts, for which they can decide both the form and the content, every online profile allows for personalization.

If the first chapter of this research identified the selfie as the successor to the methods of self-representation used in the past, but at the same time immediately dethroned it with the anti-selfie genre; in this chapter, the erasure of the face becomes more evident because it is no longer just about images, but about all those characteristics of online social platforms that allow for self-expression, regardless of what may be the representation of one's face. By learning the rules that the virtual reality entails, the user is put in the position to self-represent themselves. Then, it is their choice whether to submit to the virtual rules and let their self-representation conform to the masses, rather than take control over and use them in favor of a "representation of resistance". By "representation of resistance" I mean a representation that, acknowledging the rules imposed by the medium and the standards that society unfortunately dictates, manages to remain authentic to the self to represent it truthfully and, above all, freely. As explained at the end of the chapter, this control over one's image is of fundamental importance particularly in the case of women: if the representation of women (and especially the representation of the female body) has always been subordinated to stereotypes that portray them as disempowered and sexualized, it becomes crucial to take control of the available media and assert one's voice through them. The phone, social platforms, and the images circulating

within them seem to be tools suited for this purpose. It is no coincidence that some identify women as the creators of camera phone culture or as the inventors of blogging. According to gender stereotypes, the woman should stay at home and take care of the family, while the man is expected to go to work. Women thus become relegated to the duty of carrying out what is known as care work, and when the first telephones arrived in homes, they became an allied tool. While on one hand, the telephone marked the social gender imbalance and ensured that women, having to stay at home, could take care of their loved ones even at distance by calling them; on the other hand, especially with the development of the Internet, it became a means of rebellion in the sense that the telephone allowed women to regain their voice within an audience (followers) after it had long since been taken away from them. Instead of submitting to the male gaze that looks at them as an object, women find a way to regain their subjectivity and express it through their online profile, sharing it with a supportive community. In this way, women take power over the tools at their disposal and reclaim their identity.

2.1 Natural Instinct to Self-Representation

The relationship that each of us has with our own image can be described as almost obsessive, considering that there has always been a search for the best way to self-represent and an investigation aiming to find the most reliable means to do so. Roland Barthes faced this conundrum:

But since what I want to have captured is a delicate moral texture and not a mimicry, and since Photography is anything but subtle except in the hands of the very greatest portraitists, I don't know how to work upon my skin from within. I decide to "let drift" over my lips and in my eyes a faint smile which I mean to be "indefinable," in which I might suggest, along with the qualities of my nature, my amused consciousness of the whole photographic ritual: I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but (to square the circle) this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from any effigy. What I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) "self"; but it is the contrary that must be said: "myself" never coincides with my image⁷⁰.

Barthes wonders what the best pose to use is and how to position oneself so as not to alter what he calls the precious essence of his person. In these words, the necessity of presenting oneself in a coherent manner in respect of who one really is seems almost a dilemma that devastates the subject and for which s-/he cannot find a solution. On the contrary, the solution might be that it is not the image through which he represents himself that does not coincide with his self, but he himself who does not coincide with the image, which will inevitably be an index reducing the referent it represents.

⁷⁰ Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, Hill & Wang, New York 1982, pp. 11-12

Since Barthes speaks of pose, eyes, lips, and smiles, I consider the image formed—his image—as one representing the purely aesthetic characteristics of his person; this image, however, according to him, does not coincide with the essence of his person because representing his physical characteristics is not enough to express his true self, his inner being. In this sense, Barthes would perhaps agree in expressing a doubt as whether aesthetic representation of the self alone is insufficient to depict an object or a subject.

Undoubtedly, images play a crucial role in representing us, as they bear the role of reflecting the self of the depicted individual, regardless of the type of representation used. Ensuring that the image shared with others matches the image we have of ourselves (and thus what we consider our true self) becomes necessary, but as Barthes' point of view highlights it is also a complex task. The desire to show oneself and communicate to those around us what distinguishes us and makes us who we truly are belongs to everyone. It is a common fear to be perceived incorrectly or distortedly from reality. The concern is that the image others construct of us does not match our true self, and that we may therefore be judged on false grounds.

In a paper in which he tries to apply Goffman's theories on face-to-face interactions⁷¹ to online interactions, Hugh Miller states that «one of the things people need to do in their interactions with others is present themselves as an acceptable person»⁷². As Goffman identifies embarrassment as the indicator that allows us to understand whether the way we presented ourselves has led to a correct perception of who we are, it becomes necessary to present oneself correctly so that our true self can emerge and be understood by the person(s) with whom we are interacting. For this reason, interaction with others becomes the focal point of the discourse: at the moment of presentation, and thus also of self-representation, a reciprocal exchange of interactions inevitably arises. It is easy to reason about this in the context of face-to-face contact, but it is actually a concept transferable to the digital world, because even in this latter case, interaction with the audience is expected. Although probably not with the same depth and intensity, even in the online world, the self is presented through images with the publication of posts, and audience interact through likes, shares, and comments. Indeed, these days it

⁷¹ Erving Goffman (1922-1982) is one of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century. Descendant of the second Chicago school, he focused most on the construction of a model of “ritual interaction”. Starting from a “theater model”, in which society is viewed from the perspective of audience and performance, the individual simultaneously plays the role of actor and character and is always “inside the scene”.

⁷² Miller, Hugh, *The Presentation of Self in Electronic Life: Goffman on the Internet*, paper presented at Embodied Knowledge and Virtual Space Conference Goldsmiths College, London, 1995, p. 1
<https://www.dourish.com/classes/ics234cw04/miller2.pdf>

can be said that «the self is interpreted on the basis of its relational abilities»⁷³. In this regard, Gabriella Giannachi opens her book on the evolution of self-portraiture, defining it as

a medium for exploring a broader conception of the self temporally, spatially and socially, which includes both the artist and the viewer by virtue of their presence or implied absence. In this sense, self-portraiture is not only a matter of self-representation, but also a matter of predicting its reception. The self, in fact, is constructed in function of and by means of the actual or implicit presence of the other⁷⁴.

Being provided with this feature of relationality, social media represents the place where self-creation cannot stand alone: self-representation gains meaning the moment it is shared with other users. Therefore, the necessity that each of us has in representing ourselves also influence how we approach online platforms; in this regard, Adam Levin emphasizes that «the persistence of the products of self-presentation implies a deeply rooted cultural desire to construct images of the self and to present them to others. Selfies are an extension of this desire, expressed in the global terms of contemporary digital networks—brought out of the parlor and broadcast publicly»⁷⁵.

Actually, images are not the only means that can be used to express who we are. Jill Walker Rettberg⁷⁶ identifies three main ways to represent oneself on digital media: written, visual, and quantitative. In all three cases, these are methods applicable in the world of digital media, but which have developed following past and pre-digital modes of expression (but still valid today). Writing a personal diary or one's autobiography translates into writing on personal blogs or into status updates on social media; the device of the self-portrait transforms, as we have already seen, into that of the selfie; and finally, accounting, habit tracking, and to-do lists evolve into methods such as lifelogs, personal maps, and productivity records. The advent of digital technology has merely simplified the process of keeping these records:

With digital cameras, smart phones, and social media it is easier to create and share our self-representations. But self-representations have always been part of our culture. We have drawn, carved, sculpted, and painted images of ourselves for millennia; we have kept diaries, scrap-books, and photo albums; we have sung ballads and told stories about ourselves⁷⁷.

A single method of self-representation is not enough to ensure that the image we publish on social networks coincides with our true image: it is the multiple use of all the tools that these platforms offer

⁷³ Gabriella Giannachi, *Technologies of the Self-Portrait: Identity, Presence and the Construction of the Subject(s) in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Art*, Routledge, London 2013, p. 21

⁷⁴ Ivi, p.11

⁷⁵ Adam Levin, 2014, op. cit., pp.31-32

⁷⁶ Rettberg, Jill Walker, *Seeing ourselves through technology: how we use selfies, blogs and wearable devices to see and shape ourselves*, Palgrave, London 2014, pp-1-19

⁷⁷ Ivi, p.2

that allows us to personalize the image we create of ourselves, so that it can best express the essence of our person.

2.2 Writing our own autobiography on social networks

The democratization of the photographic process caused by the advent of digital photography, extensively discussed at paragraph [1.1], has not only led to greater accessibility to the medium but also fundamentally shifted the way people take and subsequently present their photos. When self-representing on social networks, people tend to speak in first person and to subjectivize what is depicted. Everything present on our social profiles and posted by us, regardless of its content or form, contributes to the creation of the image that will be read by users when viewing our profile. By interpreting the elements that contribute to the creation of our online profile and the posts we decide to share, the viewer will delineate our image. This means that through one's social profile, it is possible to define and communicate to others who we are, what we prefer to do, and what our interests are.

However, this is not a static image: the image formed through one's social profile is continually evolving, taking into account every change in the person as it gets updated as the user updates their profile or posts new content. Jill Walker asserts that «weblogs and online diaries parallel this development in that they are a form of self-presentation and -reflection that is cumulative rather than presented as a definitive whole»⁷⁸. Online profiles can thus be seen as true databases, where useful information accumulates to create our image on the web. Social platforms are places where one can write their own story: we have the opportunity to create our own narrative, which readers, i.e., other users, can follow as it evolves. This continuous cycle of information, updated, modified, and re-modified, also takes into account the diversity of forms through which this information is expressed. Social networks allow the use of different materials and tools: there are more direct modes, such as photos, snippets of songs, or book quotes posted in a post, or indirect modes, such as likes on certain posts or following certain pages. There is another important aspect that Jill Walker Rettberg highlights: «Even weblogs that never explicitly represent the daily life and experiences of the author usually include opinions, likes and dislikes, styles, photographs, and other snippets that pieced together can be read as a form of self-portrait»⁷⁹. With this statement, she raises an important issue: the self-portrait created on social media

⁷⁸ Walker, Jill, *Mirrors and Shadows: The Digital Aestheticisation of Oneself*, paper presented at Digital Arts and Culture Conference, Copenhagen 2005, p. 5

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 5

is not necessarily figural, nor is intentional. For example, when one decides to share a post from a page dealing with a particular political issue, it may not be with the intention of showing interest in that political issue and thus characterizing their social image with that trait. However, it is inevitable that whoever views that post will interpret it as an interest in that political cause, thereby becoming a characteristic element of the person who shared it. This means that we can self-represent ourselves not only through the photos we personally post, but also through the images posted by others with which we interact. Through the use of the modes of interaction provided by social media, we can also outline and personalize our online image.

If we analyze, for example, the features of Instagram, we can see how one's feed can be considered a true autobiography. The wide range of options that users have to express themselves and personalize their profiles allows them not only to adapt themselves to what the platforms provide but to interact with them creatively. The four key areas identified by Kerry Mallan as determining in the creation of one's online identity on MySpace⁸⁰ can also be applied to Instagram: profile content and design, profile image, friend list, and comment sections. Additionally, there are nickname and description, place tracking, chronological order, and sharing sections. Profile content and design refer to the main way an Instagram user can express themselves, through the decision and creation of content to share, whether photos, songs, books, or anything else deemed appropriate to publish. Posted content is closely linked to place tracking and chronological order of publication: each post is accompanied by the date it was posted (which may coincide with the moment the content was created or not) and, if the user wishes, a location of choice where that moment occurred. The profile image, alongside the nickname and description, represents what should primarily identify the profile owner; being highly customizable, these elements allow the user to provide a first presentation of themselves. The friend list, or rather follower list, is the list of all people following that profile and thus interacting with it; alongside it, there is also the followed list, entailing the profiles followed by the user, which theoretically should interest them. Finally, comment and sharing sections are the ways in which users interact with other profiles: commenting on a post means to express an opinion on its topics, and to share a post implies sharing the thought expressed by its content. Additionally, the algorithm cannot be ignored. The algorithm indicates a sequence of instructions to solve a problem, in order to achieve a specific result from a certain number of initial data⁸¹. In this case, the data in question are provided by the user through the aforementioned elements,

⁸⁰ Mallan, Kerry M., Giardina, Natasha, "Wikidentities: Young People Collaborating on Virtual Identities in Social Network Sites", in *First Monday* n.14(6), 2009
<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/2445/2213>

⁸¹ AAVV, "Algoritmo", in Vocabolario on line, Treccani <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/algoritmo/>

while the result is to outline the user's portrait so that the platform succeeds in displaying relevant content in advertisements or in the section called "people you may know". The functioning of the algorithm reminds us that the digital world is interconnected: the identity created on social networks cannot be considered separately from its shareability and interaction with other identities within the same social networks. The online identity cannot be independent from the context in which it is placed. Just as each of us adopts an identity within society, every profile on social media adopts an identity within the online communities to which it belongs. Adam Levin highlights the associative nature of what is posted on social networks, considering

the articulation of self through ancillary systems of identification (profiles, product affiliation, tastes in popular culture, mutual friends, and so forth) and the locative functionality of contemporary smartphones. Each inflect online identities by reinforcing communities structured around shared interests, from popular culture icons to specific brands to activities such as pub crawls, biking, running, and yoga⁸².

Regarding the posts decided to be published on one's profile and the moments shared through Instagram, they are identified by Larissa Hjorth and Sarah Pink as social, locative, and mobile.

These moments are social in that these media facilitate public and interpersonal interaction; they create forms of digital presence and copresence, which are increasingly acknowledged as part of contemporary cultures and societies (Richardson & Wilken, 2012). They are also locative in that this social and visual communication is geographically placed, both materially in that it happens in experienced material and sensory environments but also in that it is placed digitally; in both senses, the way it is placed situates it relationally. Finally, these moments are mobile; they are taken as people who are always in movement, move through their environments, and they get caught up in the movements of others. Yet they are also mobile in the very sense that they are made by mobile technologies that are ever-present in that they move with people and make possible the very making and experiencing of the emplaced sociality and visuality that characterize locative media use⁸³.

Sharing lived moments on one's social profile has become a daily activity, and thus what is posted feeds into an ongoing narration, where the self is placed at a specific instant and location yet it is visualized as in constant movement and evolution. As Chris Fallon notes,

Instagram's emphasis on the photostream and its 'instant' appearance on other social media timelines bind it more firmly with a traditional notion of individual identity, temporal linearity, and serialization progression. [...] While the focus is always on a permanent sense of 'now', the by-product is a complete documentary record of one's output arranged from past to present. Arranged in the default grid view, this record offers a type of time-lapse

⁸² Adam Levin, 2014, op. cit., p.18

⁸³ Hjorth, Larissa, Pink, Sarah, "New Visualities and the Digital Wayfarer: Reconceptualizing Camera Phone Photography and Locative Media", in *Mobile Media & Communication*, n. 2(1), 2014, p.43

portrait of one's activity. One can even imagine that an account comprised exclusively of selfies literally works as a sort of time-lapse progression of ageing⁸⁴.

Present and past intertwine on Instagram: what is published instantly and characterizes the user at the moment becomes part of a sort of archive where one can see all the steps taken. Focusing on a single post we can crystallize the moment it describes, but scrolling through the profile we can reconstruct a timeline of one's life.

According to Bernie Hogan⁸⁵, social media platforms function as “curators” of a personal exhibition made up of online identity artifacts, such as private photos uploaded to content-sharing websites or individual web pages. «An exhibition site can now be defined as a site (typically online) where people submit reproducible artifacts (data). These artifacts are held in storehouses (databases). Curators (algorithms designed by site maintainers) selectively bring artifacts out of storage for particular audiences»⁸⁶. On social media, it is possible to create a true storytelling based on self-presentation: one can decide how to weave the plot of their story and how to tell it through all the tools provided by online platforms. A mode that certainly contributes to the creation of this story, which is a true autobiography of the user, is the publication of photographs marking certain milestones in the user's life. Sonja Vivienne and Jean Burgess highlight how the practice of choosing moments to post is very similar to the practice of choosing photos to hang in a room or place in a photo album because they are significant:

Personal photographs – especially in the ways they have been collected, curated, and displayed, first in the home, and later online – have long been resources for the construction and sharing of life narratives. This social function of personal photography has been amplified exponentially with the advent of online photosharing and internet-based social networking⁸⁷.

Choosing to present oneself in a certain way on social networks is more than a display and presentation of the self, as it allows one to piece together multiple artifacts. It is a way to write, as it unfolds, their own autobiography.

⁸⁴ Fallon, Kris, “Streams of self: the Instagram feed as narrative autobiography”, in *Interactive film and media journal*, n.1(2), 2021, pp.109-111

⁸⁵ Hogan, Bernie, “The Presentation of the Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online”, in *Bulletin of Science Technology & Society*, n.30(6), 2010, pp.377-386

⁸⁶ Ivi, p.381

⁸⁷ Burgess, Jean, Vivienne, Sonja, “The remediation of the personal photograph and the politics of Self-Representation in digital storytelling”, in *Journal of material culture*, n.18(3), 2013, pp.279-298

2.3 The concept of control in the digital world

I frequently used the verb "decide" when discussing how self-identity expression works on online platforms, specifically in reference to the content we choose to post on our profiles. This term is not used randomly; rather, it highlights a key difference between the social media landscape and past self-representation techniques: the idea of control. In contrast to the past, when we allowed others to represent us, commissioning them our portraits, today we take responsibility for our own self-representation and are fully aware of the tools at our disposal. This idea is especially crucial since we can only make sure our public persona accurately represents who we are and what we want to say when we are in charge of our own image. Casey N. Cep, in this regard, asserts that «a selfie suggests that no one else in the world sees you as you truly are, that no one can be trusted with the camera but you»⁸⁸. Only you are aware of your true self, and only you can decide how to represent it. The idea that no one else can accurately portray you except yourself is a concept that, as we have previously seen, applies not only to selfies but to all content that contributes to the creation of our identity in the digital world. According to Jill Walker⁸⁹, if we compare two photos with the same content, but taken by two different person (one is taken by the same person that is portrayed in the photo, and the other is taken by another person) they inevitably differ. This explains why it is important that we represent ourselves. By leaving to others the task to represent us, they will do it accordingly to their point of view; but we conceive ourselves differently and so we must express our own perspective. In this way, we will be able to self-represent by staying true to what we want to express, and thus deciding ourselves what characteristics to load our mask with. When we are depicted by ourselves, having full control over the photoshoot process, nothing can influence or deviate us from representing ourselves as we wish, and so we'll tend to present ourselves without any imposition. When we decide to take a certain photo in a particular way or to post specific content over others on social platforms, we are taking control of our profiles, our masks, so that we are not represented by others, but rather we are in charge of presenting who we are.

The historical setting in which we live also affects the control we can exert over our social media personas. Lev Manovich explains that new media and user interaction reflect the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial society:

The principle of variability exemplifies how, historically, changes in media technologies are correlated with social change. If the logic of old media corresponds to the logic of industrial mass society, the logic of new media fits the logic of the postindustrial society, which values individuality over conformity [...] In a postindustrial society,

⁸⁸ Cep, Casey N., "In Praise of Selfies", in *Pacific Standard*, 2013, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/in-praise-of-selfies-from-self-conscious-to-self-constructive-62486>

⁸⁹ Jill Walker, 2005, op. cit.

every citizen can construct her own custom lifestyle and select her ideology from a large (but not infinite) number of choices. Rather than push the same objects/information to a mass audience, marketing now tries to target each individual separately. The logic of new media technology reflects this new social logic. Every visitor to a website automatically gets her own custom version of the site created on the fly from a database⁹⁰.

The standardization of industrial society contrasts with the personalization of post-industrial society. This means that if, in the industrial society, technology was used to enable mass production, where mass production meant distributing many identical copies of the same product to various citizens, resulting in a sort of standardization of citizenship where everyone was essentially the same; in the post-industrial society, there is a kind of dissociation between the system and the actor, leading the latter to greater personalization and subjectivation of everything in their possession⁹¹. The need to highlight the individual over the mass is a concept that we can see applied in the changing types of apps used more or less frequently over different periods. Not coincidentally, if initially one of the most used platforms for sharing images was Flickr, where the individual was hidden behind the large mass of the group, today social networks like Instagram are more popular, where one's profile, personality, and individual narrative are highlighted. The issue of individuality versus the mass implies greater attention (and control) towards the construction of one's identity online: the subject no longer conforms to societal standards but is called to make a series of personal choices to distinguish themselves by customizing their online profile and its content through a series of variables, more or less limited. It is in this choice that the control each of us has over the image of ourselves formed online is expressed.

However, the concept of control applied to digital, and especially to social platforms, is a much more delicate issue, as it also works in the opposite direction to what I have previously outlined. The origins of the concept of surveillance within visual culture can be traced as far back as to the concept of perspective. Perspective is a system of visibility, because it allows us to order and control what we see. It gave rise to a new way of expressing visual power: the core feature of perspective was not so much its ability to depict space as it was, but rather doing it from one specific viewpoint. Perspective provided for a spectator placed outside the scene, from where s-/he had the power to look and monitor the situation. In this way visibility came from a single point, and through this a centered control of the subject. This concept is linked to the one of Panopticon, which is an ideal prison designed in 1791 by the philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham, where only the guard (opticon) is able to observe all (pan) the prisoners without them realizing they are being watched or not. The perspective

⁹⁰ Manovich, Lev, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2001, pp.41-42

⁹¹ Touraine, Alain, "Società postindustriale", in *Enciclopedia delle scienze sociali*, Treccani, 1998
[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/societa-postindustriale_\(Enciclopedia-delle-scienze-sociali\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/societa-postindustriale_(Enciclopedia-delle-scienze-sociali)/)

positioned at the center is what gives power to the observer: the guard, positioned within the control tower at the center of the structure, is able to see the prisoners in their cells positioned in the outer ring. Unlike the supervisors, the prisoners are neither able to see who is in the control tower nor their peers.

*A General Idea of a PENITENTIARY PANOPTICON in an Improved, but as yet, (Jan^y 23^d 1791), Unfinished State.
See Postscript References to Plan, Elevation, & Section (being Plate referred to as A. 2).*

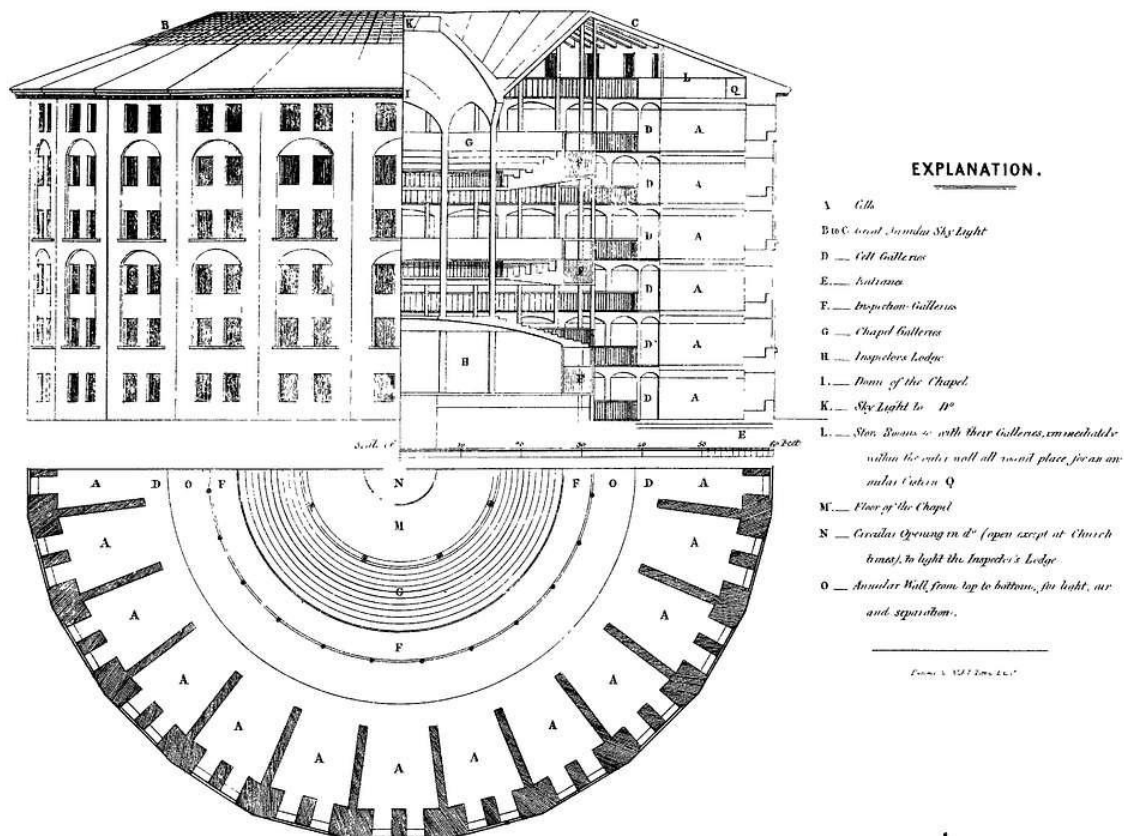


Figure 6: Architectural explanation of the penitentiary Panopticon (Source: <https://garystockbridge617.getarchive.net/media/penetentiary-panopticon-plan-430891>)

This particular type of construction has always been used to explain power relations. For example, the French philosopher Michel Foucault who extensively studies this model prison as a *dispositif*⁹², associates the concept of power with that of visibility:

Bentham posited the principle that power had to be visible and invertible. Visible: continuously the prisoner will have before his eyes the tall silhouette of the central tower from where he is spied. Inverifiable: the detainee must

⁹² Foucault introduced the concept of a device as a complex network of heterogeneous elements that exert influence on subjects. The interaction between devices creates a series of power and knowledge relationships that shape people's behavior and perceptions. Because they are dynamic, thus subject to change according to new societal needs, studying devices means analyzing not only their concrete manifestations, but also their deeper implications on our lives and our sense of autonomy and freedom.

never know whether he is being watched, in the present moment; but he must be sure that he can be watched continuously⁹³.

Dissociating the seeing-being-seen pair, the Panopticon is seen by Foucault as a device that «automates and individualizes power»⁹⁴. Regardless of who exercises it and for what reason, anyone can make this device work: without the need for any means of coercion, all it takes is the establishment of fields of visibility to seize power. In this way, perspective becomes a means of social control and surveillance, because we can distinguish between two positions: that of the observer and that of the observed.

If in the 18th century, the camera obscura was used as a module to explain human vision and represent the relation of the perceiver and the position of a subject to the external world; when this device went through changes, also the observer became more sophisticated and the way to represent visual power had to change. The advent of epistemological ruptures led us to the passage from one module to another: (1) the new observer is not external anymore, but internal and s-/he is to be found in a variety of practices and discourses not necessarily located in a fixed position anymore; (2) the body becomes a key element in the discourse around the vision; (3) the emergence of the concept of afterimage, as the optical phenomenon that refers to the persistence of images on the retina of the eye, made us reflect upon that even if there is a separation from one image to another, when you move you perceive them in continuity.

Then, in 1992 Mitchell defined the *pictorial turn*, characterized by a sense of power given to representations: pictures become a model or figure in order to understand other things. According to Mitchell, the pictorial turn is «a post linguistic, post semiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex element, a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, discourse, bodies and figurality»⁹⁵. Referring to Panofsky's iconology, in which pictures are put at the center of a complex multilayered set of processes, Mitchell goes beyond the limit of this theory that sees the spectator as generic and abstract, to state that pictures are meant for someone and so that the spectator has not to be left out. In regard to the importance of the spectator, Jonathan Crary is directed towards a reintegration of the observer: visual artifacts are to be seen in relation to the spectator, because s-/he is who actually use them. Additionally, he stands for a heterogeneity both of the media configurations and of the viewers. According to Crary, the spectator is not just one individual person with specific characteristic that remains all the same.

⁹³ Foucault, Michael, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin Books Ltd, London 2020, p. 221

⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 222

⁹⁵ Mitchell, W. J. Thomas, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 1995, p.16

These concepts of the importance of the spectator and their variability, is something that resonates with the conception of the virtual world, because of its interconnectivity feature.

It can be argued that social networks are places where every user is constantly monitored; to the extent that they are often associated with the concept of the Panopticon. The concept of surveillance that the Panopticon helps us delineate applies to the use of social media online, as within them we know we are being watched but do not know when and by whom. But the Panopticon model applies to online surveillance with some modifications: guard and prisoner merge into the same person, as each user finds themselves being both the watched and the watcher. The work of the 2018 Hasselblad Prize winner, Colombian artist Oscar Muñoz entitled *Palimpsesto*, offers a simple and precise explanation of the simultaneity of these two roles. The work consists of a double mirror, where the silver of the reflective surface has been partially removed, creating areas of transparent glass. The peculiarity of the object is that two people, reflecting themselves from either side, simultaneously see both their own image and that of the other. The crossing of glances that occurs through this particular mirror makes us reflect on the dual concept of control on social platforms: simultaneously, I see myself and I see the other. It is a two-way Panopticon: the seen is also the seer, the controlled is also the controller⁹⁶.

Within the virtual environment, public and private space merge and the processes of subjectification change as a result of the formation of a society in which, as seen with the *pictorial turn*, more and more importance is placed on vision. New technologies have visual and pervasive nature and allow globalized control over cities, where the relationship between humans and space change. Surveillance pervades the entire city, due to what Giorgio Agamben calls «a gigantic accumulation and proliferation of devices»⁹⁷, where by device he means «anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, shape, control and secure the gestures, conducts and opinions and discourses of living beings»⁹⁸. The use of cell phones and surveillance cameras characterizes a type of surveillance that is not concentrated in one place, as in the case of the Panopticon, but spreads throughout the city through a dense network of technologies that are invisible, but that make you continuously visible. In this regard, Hille Koskela focuses on the transition from the city as physical space to cyberspace, where control becomes daily. Moreover, he emphasizes that «what must be acknowledged is the gendered nature of to-be-looked-at-ness»⁹⁹. Koskela, in this way, connotes the processes of surveillance in terms of gender, as the act of observing changes depending on whether

⁹⁶ Giusti, Sergio, “Immagine-atto/Immagine-arto: la fotografia come protesi tra performance e comportamento nell'era della condivisione con le fotocamere in rete”, in *Mediascape Journal*, n.12, 2019, p. 35

⁹⁷ Agamben, Giorgio, *Che cos'è un dispositivo*, Roma, Zanardelli, 2006, pp. 23

⁹⁸ Ivi, pp. 21-22

⁹⁹ Koskela, Hille, “Cam-Era – The Contemporary Urban Panopticon”, in *Surveillance and Society*, n.1, 2003, p.301

the object is a female, rather than a male, subject. Bauman also goes beyond the concept of panoptic, defining the modern society as *liquid*¹⁰⁰, as it has witnessed a deconstruction of individual lives and everyday life by weakening the subject and fueling social control. Bauman defines the post-panoptic society, in which the control/freedom dichotomy is overcome and new devices emerge that tend to standardize behavior in a noncoercive manner.

On the one hand, the old panoptic stratagem (“you will never know when they observe your body, and in this way your mind will never stop feeling observed.”) is implemented gradually but in a consistent and apparently unstoppable way, on an almost universal scale. On the other hand, now that the old panoptic nightmare of “never being alone” has given way to the apparent hope of “never being alone again” (abandoned, ignored and neglected, failed and excluded), the pleasure of being noticed takes over from the fear of being revealed¹⁰¹.

In post-panoptic society, surveillance takes two forms: the constant collection of data, through which each individual's profile can be defined (Banopticon), and the definition of a place where few observe many, but many want to be seen (Synopticon). Since the 2000s, the spread of locative media has brought to a shift in the perception of space, introducing new geospatial experiences. According to Lev Manovich, reality is configured as a *dataspace*, characterized by the diffusion of locative media with the presence of monitors and displays in the city, and by the surveillance ubiquity¹⁰². In this case, the surveillance concept is composed by two levels: the monitoring by surveillance cameras and the ongoing assistance by locative media. Virtual technologies do not entail a new world, but permeate the physical one, filling it with digital data. Digital surveillance is the targeted and systematic monitoring of personal data carried out through telematic device tracking systems, including smartphones, and the detection of traces left on the Internet¹⁰³. This monitoring of the data we choose to enter into the network is undeniable, but it is also true that we decide which of these data to insert into the system, that is, what and how to post. On social networks, we must not forget that we are constantly being monitored for what we do, but precisely because of this, it is important to control what we decide to do.

The concept of control is not something too singular, rather it manifests in the simplest ways in daily life. First and foremost, with the advent of new technologies (and this is especially evident when we decide to take a selfie), the devices available today allow us to view and control the photo we are taking while taking it, as these are devices that simultaneously allow us to capture the image

¹⁰⁰ Bauman defines the liquid-modern society «whether the situations in which humans act change before their ways of behaving manage to consolidate into habits and procedures» (Bauman, Zygmunt, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000, p. VI).

¹⁰¹ Bauman, Zygmunt, Lyon, David, *Liquid Surveillance. A Conversation*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2013

¹⁰² Manovich, Lev, “The poetics of Augmented Space”, in *Visual Communication*, n.5, 2006

¹⁰³ AAVV, “Sorveglianza digitale”, in *Neologismi*, Treccani, 2020 https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/sorveglianza-digitale_%28Neologismi%29/

and view our reflection in them. Additionally, in the days of analog photography, only those who were members of a camera club or had a darkroom at home could control the entire image creation process; however, with the democratization of photography and photographic tools, there has also been a democratization of image control. Today, not only photographers can control the photographic process, but all of us can, and at almost zero marginal cost. The necessary equipment for manipulating images, such as computers and printers, is now within everyone's reach. Moreover, many software programs that allow working with images are free and not restricted only to industry professionals with the right skills, but developed to be simple and intuitive. The ease and cost-free nature with which we control the photos taken, deciding which to keep and which to delete, allows us to decide which image represents us best and thus have control over the image created of us.

The control we can exercise over the social world occurs, therefore, in two moments: both in the moment of creating a potential social content and in the moment of choosing what and how to post. Regarding the control each of us can exercise when deciding to create a potential content, it refers to the ability to manage all the elements that, for example, will make up the photo: location, pose, light, context are all modifiable variables, even in post-production, that make us free to express ourselves as we see fit. The fact that the means foresee that the user can make decisions regarding more or less variables determines the concept of power, as we are free to construct our online image as we want and thus have control over it. Control is not only exercised over how a particular photo is taken, but also over the entire process of sharing on social networks: we are in a position to decide, among the created content, which to share and how to do it, choosing whether to add more or fewer details within the post.

This discourse should make us understand that even though we are used thinking that technology prevails over humans, and that the way online sites are created and the methods provided for modifying them can influence our way of creating our identity within them, in reality, we ourselves can take control of these spaces. Control lies precisely in knowing the limits and rules of the medium used, to then subvert and use them to our advantage. Picasso himself, criticized for painting like a child, explained that his choice to paint that way could only come from a complete knowledge of the proper techniques: «Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist»¹⁰⁴. Knowing every feature of the medium used, in his case painting, is what allowed him to subvert the inherent rules of the medium and paint in his own way, according to his own rules. Knowing the codes of

¹⁰⁴ This quote is attributed to Pablo Picasso (Malaga, 25 October 1881 – Mougins, 8 April 1973). Spanish painter, sculptor and lithographer, among the most influential of the 20th century, he was an innovative and eclectic artist, who marked the history of art by being the founder, together with Georges Braque, of Cubism.

social networks is what allows us to manipulate them to creatively approach the medium and use it according to our own ends.

2.4 Social Media: Masculine or Feminine Plural Noun?

A characteristic often attributed to phone technology is its ability to eliminate disparities: phones can overcome temporal and spatial barriers, but not the social hierarchies of class and gender. In *Gender on the Phone: Women, the Telephone and Community Life*, Lana Rakow explains how the telephone is a technology for women:

The telephone is not simply a household convenience that women in particular enjoy, as popular perception and academic speculation have it. Instead [...] the telephone provides a network for gender work (social practices that create and sustain individuals as women or men) and gendered work (productive activity assigned to women)¹⁰⁵.

Technologies like the telephone, instead of being used to re-establish social order, have been used to further mark social inequalities, which are reflected in women's use of these technologies. In fact, the telephone represents a technology that fits well with all those activities usually carried out by women. The telephone allows for emotional work: women can stay in touch with family and friends more easily, even when separated by great distances. In this way, the advent and modes of use of telephone only underscores the limits and restrictions to which women are relegated, and to which the telephone offers the illusion of a solution. Patriarchal capitalist society envisions women as marginal figures confined to private spaces, namely the home, where their role is to take care of their family, and where telephoning functions as a form of care work. This is a form of labor that derives from gender meanings and that positions women in a specific role within their family and society in general. Women are assigned the task of taking care of their husbands, children, elderly or disabled relatives, the sick, or the unhappy; but it is also important that they ensure that friends and other community members are well. In this sense, making phone calls is an act that represents caring for others, where the frequency, duration, and content of the calls determine the degree of care work women perform. The fact that telephone use is now attributed with a feminine stamp should prompt us to question why this attribution exists, which arises precisely from the limitations that characterize women's lives. Nevertheless, regardless of all this, it is possible to regain control of the medium and use it in a different and political manner.

Girls and women, accustomed to being seen as objects, have learned to describe themselves, contrasting the narrative that implicitly sees them as the sole subject burdened by the emotional labor

¹⁰⁵ Rakow, Lana F., *Gender on the Line: Women, the Telephone and Community Life*, University of Illinois Press, United States 1992, p.1

of their families and communities; this practice applies very well to social networks, where one is called upon to speak about oneself. In fact, when referring to social media, these digital practices are often attributed to women, as they seem more inclined to create blogs and personal pages than men. Blogs and social profiles become places where women can free themselves from the chains imposed on them by society, as they are places focused on self-expression. These online platforms are based precisely on each user's expression of their own voice and sharing it with others, representing for women a way to rediscover their voice and express themselves freely. Not only can women develop a sense of agency because they have reclaimed their confident and assertive voice, but they also position themselves within a supportive community, further empowering them. The study conducted by Carmen Stavrositu and Shyam Sundar

explored the relationship between blogging and psychological empowerment among women. First, a survey revealed that personal journaling empowers users by inducing a strong sense of community, whereas filter blogging does so by enhancing their sense of agency. [...] The number of site visits and number of comments affect psychological empowerment through distinct mechanisms – the former through the sense of agency and the latter through the sense of community¹⁰⁶.

The sense of agency combined with being part of a community determines the retrieval of women's own personal voice, which is also validated by others. In fact, Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gomez Cruz state that «Sharing, commenting, reblogging, and actively participating in the community socially reinforces ways of looking and experiencing bodies in a new, body-positive, feminist, and queer-friendly way»¹⁰⁷. Social media platforms represent a space in which truly express themselves and being supported not only for women, but also for all the other identity and gender minorities. The argumentation is the same: if in the real world their voice has been silenced because it was considered of inferior relevance in respect to the dominant, in the virtual world they can reclaim their agency.

The historical denial of women's voices has been a prevalent issue; however, online platforms now represent a medium through which, if used correctly, these voices can be highlighted. Individuals populate their social media profiles with user-generated content, providing a means of self-portrayal. These spaces provide opportunity for each of us to overcome the conventional gender representation, although they are full of pitfalls: it's easy to fall into the risk that these representations will reinforce gender stereotypes. For this reason, it is important that we represent ourselves. Social networks are

¹⁰⁶ Stavrositu, Carmen, Sundar, Shyam S., "Does Blogging Empower Women? Exploring the role of agency and community", in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, n.17(4), 2012, pp. 369

¹⁰⁷ Tiidenberg, Katrin, Cruz, Edgar Gomez, "Selfies, image and the Re-making of the body", in *Body & Society*, n.21(4), 2015, pp.7-8

platforms for personal expression, where authoring one's own voice is a statement of subjectivity and power.

2.5 Reclaiming Control Over One's Image

Gender disparity in visual culture stems from the dynamic by which the one being observed becomes the object for those who are looking. Historically, this dualism between the observer and the observed has been connected to the man and female unbalance and translated onto the scopic level. The observer is most likely connected to a male figure endowed with agency, while the woman represents the observed entity, flattened to a mere object. The gaze of the men is an active gaze, that falls back on the women, who on the contrary is the passive subject: the faculty of doing belonging to women is absent, because they're just the object of someone else gaze. This is the key assumptions of Feminist Film Theory dating back to the mid-seventies and formulated mainly by Laura Mulvey¹⁰⁸ argued that the dominant and controlling gaze in classical Hollywood films is always male. Classic Hollywood narrative cinema is constructed specifically for the heterosexual male viewer erotic look, and this become a controlling gaze of classic cinema, where women are positioned as objects. Related to this, an important key concept is that of scopophilia: the erotic pleasure of looking. Scopophilia refers to looking without being seen and to have control and command over what is being looked at. To look implies an object to be seen and for Mulvey that object is the figure of the women, that become the object of male gaze. In this way, cinema mimics the sexual/gender imbalance that characterize real-life power relations as they are expressed by means of gaze dynamics, which tend to associate a sense activity/passivity on a gendered base. The character on screen and the spectator are basically part of mechanism that are disposed to reinforce the male gaze: the system put men in the center, so desire belongs to men, while the object of desire are women. Similarly, in other artistic practices, the male gaze has rendered women as passive objects. Whilst by admission of Mulvey herself, there are aspects that have been needing update and reshuffling¹⁰⁹, the basic formulation at the heart of FFT has been characterizing the representation of the female body for a long time (and still today), producing fetishisations and sexualisations. This lack of control over their own image has prompted women to seek to reclaim it. John Berger¹¹⁰ emphasized how women have had little control over the representation of their bodies, as «men act, and women appear». Reduced to mere objects of

¹⁰⁸ Mulvey, Laura, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, in *Screen*, n.16(3), 1975, pp. 6–18

¹⁰⁹ Backman Rogers, Anna, Mulvey, Laura (eds), *Feminisms. Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2015, pp. 17-18

¹¹⁰ Berger, John, *Ways of seeing*, Penguin Books Ltd, London 2008

desire or inspirational muses, women are passive: «Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at».

According to Dong-Hoo Lee, women can overturn the structure of the male gaze through the use of camera phones:

One can look at oneself as the object and, at the same time, can practice the I of the subject; I become the observer of me. The process, in which she searches for her ideal image, enthusiastically repositioning her camera phone, enables the woman to be an active spectator. This process subverts the conventions of the gaze, that 'men act and women appear, men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at'¹¹¹.

When women portray themselves and present themselves on social networks, they are in complete control of the gaze that will be directed at them: it is they themselves who mirror on the screen and decide how to present themselves, assuming an active role. Casey N. Cep also identifies the submission of women resulting from the male gaze as the spark that has determined this reclaiming of power over their own image:

It's not surprise that self-portraiture is a genre in which women have long excelled. For so long the male gaze fixed women on the canvas, page, and screen as subjects, but self-portraiture allowed women to challenge this gaze with the ways in which they saw themselves. From Frida Kahlo's plaintive, surrealistic self-portraits in oil to Cindy Sherman's conceptual, performative portraits of herself as actresses, gods, and models, female artists have embraced the genre as a way of reclaiming their own image¹¹².

In this regard, the way of looking, the model of image spectatorship, must change: the gaze cannot be univocal, and particularly, it cannot be purely masculine. It varies from person to person, as influenced by sexuality, race, class, education, ability, and nationality. This multiplicity of perspectives is even more evident in the world of social media, where the circulating images require interaction from the viewer. As Paul Frosh¹¹³ states, the images circulating on the internet not only say «see this, here, now» but they say «see me showing you me» and therefore invite us to think about the identity «between the self as an image and as a body, as a constructed effect of representation and as an object and agent of representation». The photos posted on social media are such and assume meaning when they are viewed by other users; and that is why it becomes even more important that within these spaces, the gaze is not singular (and biased, like that of the male gaze) but open to multiple perspectives. It is almost a takeover by the photos themselves: the need to be looked at is

¹¹¹ Lee, Dong-Hoo, "Women's Creation of Camera Phone Culture", in *The Fibreculture Journal*, n.6, 2005, <https://six.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-038-womens-creation-of-camera-phone-culture/>

¹¹² Casey N. Cep, 2013, op. cit.

¹¹³ Frosh, Paul, 2015, op. cit.

inherent in their nature, and that is why they are no longer subservient to the gaze; it does not make them more passive.

Another issue looming when discussing the representation of the female body, and women in general, is that they usually reflect typical gender stereotypes. Addressing female representation, Nicola Doring, Anne Reif, and Sandra Poeschl explain that

women in television commercials are younger than male models. Furthermore, men and women still differ referring to their roles performed in adverts: female characters in the media seem to only have limited authority and often appear in assisting roles while men are more often in executive roles in TV commercials. The typical stereotypes of the mother and housewife and the man as breadwinner are still predominant. Women are more likely than men to be portrayed inside the home. In contrast to this, male advertising characters are more likely to be depicted in occupational settings than females¹¹⁴.

It is evident how the images circulating on television, but generally through any form of traditional and non-traditional media, have immense power, namely to convey a discriminatory message in this case. Erving Goffman¹¹⁵ distinguished the ways in which women are represented as the inferior sex into five categories, unfortunately still often used: (1) smaller depiction of women in respect of men, (2) feminine touch, (3) women assisting men in executive roles, (4) women portrayed in lower positions than men, (5) licensed withdrawal, especially of their gaze from the camera. In addition to these categories, it is important to add a sixth category, identified by Kang¹¹⁶, which refers to (6) body display, as women are often represented wearing revealing clothes or with no clothes at all. In this regard, although distancing from the context of visual cultures, it is important to mention the census regarding female representation in statuary conducted by the association *Mi riconosci*¹¹⁷, which clearly emphasizes how the representation of women is pervaded by sexism. This research project highlights the gender differences in statuary representation of women, which embody the general situation on the representation of the female body. The ongoing investigation commenced in September 2021, with the book *Comunque nude: La rappresentazione femminile nei documenti pubblici italiani*¹¹⁸ referencing only to data collected up

¹¹⁴ Doring, Nicola, Reif, Anne, Poeschl, Sandra, "How Gender-Stereotypical are Selfies? A Content Analysis and Comparison with Magazine Adverts", in *Computer in Human Behavior*, n.55, 2016, p. 956

¹¹⁵ Goffman, Erving, *Gender Advertisements*, Harper Torchbooks, New York 1987

¹¹⁶ Kang, ME, "The Portrayal of Women's Images in Magazine Advertisements: Goffman's Gender Analysis Revisited", in *Sex Roles*, n.37, 1997, pp.979-996

¹¹⁷ *Mi riconosci? Sono un professionista dei beni culturali* (Do you recognize me? I'm a cultural heritage professional) was born in November 2015 from a group of students and young professionals connected to the student organization Link-Coordinatione Universitario.association. Since then, dislocated into several active groups in different countries of Italy, it has been involved in information, denunciation and proposal actions on issues relating to the management of cultural heritage and working conditions in the sector.

¹¹⁸ Lunardon, Ester, Piazz, Ludovica (a cura di), *Comunque nude. La rappresentazione femminile nei documenti pubblici italiani*, Mimesis edizioni, Milano 2023

to October 2022. The research encompasses «full-body monuments, statues, and busts of real women, literary or legendary figures, and collective anonymous figures» for a total of 245 works, supplemented by an additional forty-four representing groups of collective anonymous figures or, although not strictly collective anonymous figures, still portraying women and girls, or addressing specific female themes, along with another four concerning female emancipation and two focusing on male violence against women. The results obtained from this census are startling, primarily revealing «a clear numerical disproportion between monuments dedicated to women and monuments dedicated to men»¹¹⁹, where the few monuments depicting women are often relegated to the outskirts of the city or to locations with little visibility. Furthermore, less than half of the considered statues depict real women, favoring the representation of saints or blessed figures, tragically deceased women or girls, or benefactors and life-savers. Of particular concern is

the tendency to emphasize the beauty of the figures, often depicted nude or highly sexualized [...] This erotic connotation reveals, on one hand, the tendency to prioritize a male gaze on the female body, and on the other hand, conveys an implicit message that being attractive is an indispensable characteristic for a woman, who is judged worthy of remembrance primarily based on her physical appearance rather than her actions or ideas¹²⁰.

Notably, «in addition to being few and stereotyped, the works portraying female figures are in the vast majority of cases created by men»¹²¹. A stunning 89% of the sculptures bear only male signatures, explaining the presence of the male gaze and thus the sexualized gaze through which women are represented. The data collected by this census directly and clearly explain the issue around the representation of the female body: in most of the cases, if not in all cases, women are represented fetishised and sexualised.

The investigation conducted by the *Mi riconosci* association draws attention to an issue that requires intervention. Since the 1960s and 1970s, female artists have sought to dismantle the androcentrism that dominates the art world through two main paths: destruction, such as splattering pink paint on the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan¹²², and creation, such as Judy Chicago's femmage *The Dinner Party*¹²³. What becomes necessary is to hack and subvert the rules already

¹¹⁹ Ester Lunardonì, Ludovica Piazzì (a cura di), 2023, op. cit., p.17

¹²⁰ Ivi, p.18

¹²¹ Ivi, p.20

¹²² The bronze monument representing Indro Montanelli was created by the sculptor Vito Tongiani in 2006. The statue has been the cause of numerous criticisms, including that it is not correct to make a statue in honor of a person accused of having "purchased" a child bride. This is the reason that led the activists of the feminist group *Non una di meno* to smear the statue with washable pink paint on 8 March 2019, during a demonstration for International Women's Day, claiming the gesture as "a dutiful redemption action".

¹²³ *The Dinner Party* is an installation, staged from 1974 to 1979, by Judy Chicago (Chicago, 20 July 1939), an American feminist artist. It consists of a large equilateral triangle, set for 39 seats for prominent female figures, to which are added the 999 women's names written on the floor tiles.

written. In this sense, the body becomes a «significant site of overturning from object to subject of representation»¹²⁴, a concept that underpins the artistic production of the two contemporary artists I have chosen to exemplify this subversion: Erin M. Riley and Qualeasha Wood.

Both artists work in textile art. The weaver occupation is traditionally feminine, which assumes significant meaning in terms of hacking the artistic tool. Instead of confining weaving to a practice of care work, they use it to create artworks that prompt reflection on all those topics considered shameful and to be concealed. In this way, not only the medium's use is overturned, but light is shed on all those themes that are often considered as taboo. In this sense, the weaver occupation from a feminine occupation becomes a feminist one. Furthermore, as artists who merge the real world with the digital one, the choice to use the art of weaving has even more significance as modern computing can be considered the successor of the jacquard system, where a pixel is like a stitch.

Erin M. Riley¹²⁵ utilizes personal photographs and online images to address themes such as violence, self-harm, and objectification. Her works stem from photographs of her own body, often taken in front of a mirror, which are real selfies. Through the weaving process, they do not lose their "digital characteristics" because, on the contrary, the tapestries obtained maintain their pixelation. In a reality stuck between physical and virtual worlds, the artist decides to self-represent alongside objects that are "a bit punk": her more or less complete nudity is depicted while she is on the toilet or masturbating, within a frame containing tampons, condoms, money, syringes, and guns. Stitch-by-stitch, the artist seeks her identity, juxtaposing the representation of her body with more ephemeral elements. The annulment of the face is not only found in the choice to load objects, therefore still life, with important meanings, but also in the more direct practice of never representing the features of her face: eyes, nose, and lips are absent, her face is a region of uniform color, where only the bangs seem to characterize her. Yet, despite not being able to recognize the artist by her face, looking at her art, we recognize her perfectly. Reflecting on the representation of the female body, in an interview, the artist asserts that she is not depicting a body, but a person, namely herself¹²⁶. At the heart of her artistic practice lies the self-representation of her own body, but it is important to go beyond this concept to emphasize that the body she represents is not an object, but a person. The male gaze is hacked: in Erin N. Riley's works, the female body is not an object of desire but the subject chosen to express those concepts that no longer see women as passive subjects.

¹²⁴ Bertolino, Giorgina, *Il lavoro del nostro corpo e l'opera delle nostre mani. Intervista all'artista e racconti di ruolo*, in Trasforini M.A. (a cura di), *Donne d'arte. Storie di Generazioni*, Meltemi, Roma 2006, p.167

¹²⁵ <https://erinriley.com/section/510575-2022.html>

¹²⁶ <https://ta-daan.com/it/blogs/journal/erin-m-riley-interview>

In the case of Qualeasha Wood¹²⁷ too, the representation of the female body is at the center of her artistic practice, however, the artist focuses on the bodies of black women, intertwining the racial topic with issues related to surveillance and vulnerability. As a black woman, the concept of safety in both online and offline spaces is a complicated one. Since her image is often fetishized, she uses contradictory symbolism to reflect on the condition of pain and pleasure of black women: religious symbolism, such as crosses or halos, intertwines with banners and pop-up messages typical of pornographic sites. This contradiction is explained by the hypersexualization of black women: seeking to destroy the white canon, the artist self-represents herself as if she were a sacred religious figure (usually represented by white women), but within a highly racialized context. The description of the work *The [Black] Madonna/Whore Complex* (2021), acquired by the Met, encapsulates the essence of her artistic practice: «By presenting herself as a sacred icon and, at the same time, as an object of desire, Wood rejects the racist and sexist stereotype that black women are nothing more than promiscuous commodities, sanctifying and controlling her own image»¹²⁸. For the artist, it is essential to reclaim control over her own image; in fact, she says, «If I'm going to get fetishized out here, I'm going to fetishize myself». However, the peculiarity of Qualeasha Wood's artistic process lies not only in the content of her works but also in the process of creating the work itself, where the digital element plays a significant role. The first step involves taking a selfie in front of her webcam or iPhone, followed by the creation of a collage using Photoshop, which is then transformed into textile art. In the collage creation phase, glitches may occur, which, instead of being erased, the artist highlights, symbolizing how the internet is a space full of opportunities but also of many risks. In fact, the artist has been doxxed multiple times.

The works of Erin M. Riley and Qualeasha Wood foster what I initially called "representations of resistance" because both, in a society that represses women's voices, manage to subvert the rules, hack the means, and take control of their own image and own body to offer reflections on topics considered taboo.

¹²⁷ <https://qualeasha.com/>

¹²⁸ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/853462>

CHAPTER 3: FILTERS AS REVEALERS OF THE INTANGIBLE

The previous chapter emphasized the importance of hacking: hacking social conventions and the means used in the process of self-representation are fundamental actions for reclaiming one's image. In this chapter, I will focus on how digital filters fit into this context: these tools inherently possess a hacking function, as they manipulate the image they are superimposed upon, thereby influencing the control of one's identity. The term "filter" is used in various fields, meaning «a device containing paper, sand, chemicals, etc. that a liquid or gas is passed through in order to remove any materials that are not wanted», «a device that allows only particular types of light or sound to pass through it», or, in computing, «a tool on digital cameras, photo apps, etc. that allows you to change the appearance of an image»¹²⁹. The first two definitions mark the notion that filters allow certain elements to pass while exclude others, which in the last one translates in the possibility to change an image's features. The ability to choose what to let pass and what to exclude echoes the themes discussed in the previous chapters, bringing us back to the concept of the mask: through a filter, we can decide what to let through and what not, which translates into choosing what to conceal and what to reveal.

Focusing on how digital filters work, once the computer detects the image, it creates an invisible surface composed of dozens of dots and overlays it on the picture so that the filter's graphics can be positioned precisely on this surface. It is evident that filters can be seen as an additional mask, an extra surface placed over the mask chosen as a means of self-representation, allowing the latter to be enriched with meanings it otherwise lost. For this reason, I agree with Alice Cati's notion of refraction: she prefers to consider images as refracted rather than reflected because «the reflected image multiplies, is diverted, and refracted thanks to the numerous surfaces that the subject encounters»¹³⁰. While, usually, self-representations are considered reflected image, as they represent our image as reflected in a mirror; according to Alice Cati they are rather refracted images, because they are the result of the image encountering multiple surfaces, which, for me, are precisely masks and filters. The self, refracting on the various masks and filters we decide to superimpose to him, show itself. Another concept related to filters is that the ability to choose what to let through or not holds power in the creation of one's image. Applying filters to an image generally means manipulating it through specific tools. In this sense, power is exercised in the moment we can modify the image at will, making the sole subject responsible for the meaning that the image will acquire.

¹²⁹ AAVV, "filter", in *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*

https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/filter_1

¹³⁰ Alice Cati, 2010, op. cit., p. 196

The verb “to filter”, in the context of a fluid, means « to pass liquid, light, etc. through a special device, especially to remove something that is not wanted»¹³¹. Translating this definition in the digital world, filtering is the act of passing an image through a medium that can retain certain characteristics in order to shed light upon others, providing a representation of the self that reflects not only the external envelope of what is represented but also its essence.

The concept of filters is often associated with new digital technologies, but in fact its roots date back to the early 20th century. Considering, for example, the expressionists, art historian Ernst Gombrich in *La storia dell'arte*¹³² explains how Van Gogh, when painting a portrait of a dear friend, considered achieving conventional likeness as only the first stage of the entire artistic process. After painting an “exact” portrait, he would exaggerate or adjust certain colors and features. In one of his letters, Van Gogh explains:

I exaggerate the blond color of the hair, use orange, chrome, lemon, and behind the head, I do not paint the mundane wall of the room but the infinite. I lay down on a simple background the most intense and rich blue that the palette can provide. The blond and luminous head stands out against this charged blue background, mysteriously, like a star in the sky. Alas, dear friend, the public will see nothing but a caricature of this accentuation. But what does it matter¹³³?

This accentuation, as Van Gogh calls it, is based on the same concept one relies on when choosing to manipulate photos before posting them. The process is akin to creating a caricature: it plays with the portrait of its subject and deforms it to express what the artist thinks of the subject. Van Gogh himself worries that the friend’s caricature he is creating will not be understood by the external world, because he’s afraid that the way in which he manipulates the friend’s facial features make him unrecognizable. In my opinion, the subject is more recognizable precisely because of the traits that the artist emphasize and distort: even if detached from the external representation of the subject, they are able to represent his essence. Parallel to this concept, the intent with which I write this thesis today wants to underline that a filtered (or caricatured) image does not have less value than an apparently real and truthful one. On the contrary, these two images, the filtered and the truthful ones, should not be placed in different categories. It is exactly this manipulation of the image through various tools, effects, and filters that determines a greater truth of the photo. «It is the naked truth: our sensations of things color our way of seeing them and even more the forms we remember. Anyone can have experienced how the same place appears different depending on our state of mind»¹³⁴. Despite being not tangible, emotions and

¹³¹ AAVV, “filter (verb)”, in *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*

https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/filter_2

¹³² Gombrich, Ernst H., *La storia dell'arte*, Phaidon Press Limited, Londra 2021, p. 563

¹³³ Ivi, p.564

¹³⁴ Ivi, p.564

feelings contribute to the formation of the image, filling it with meanings that can be expressed through a particular use of color or shapes, which is achieved by manipulating the image through filters. Besides the many artistic movements that develop their contribution around this posture – from Expressionism to Fauve - an artwork that famously demonstrates how emotions and feelings modify the aesthetics of what is represented is Edward Munch's *The Scream* (1893), and generally, all his works. *The Scream* «aims to express how a sudden emotion can transform all our sensory impressions»¹³⁵.

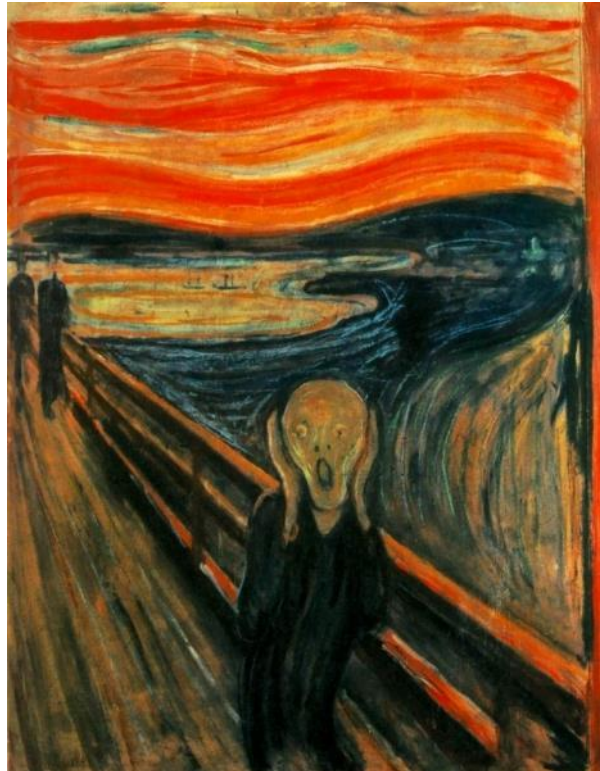


Figure 7: Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893, oil, tempera, pastel on cardboard, National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo (Source: <https://www.needpix.com/photo/613158/edvard-munch-scream-painting-terror-nightmare-surrealism-fear-fright>)

Emotions modify the somatic features and also the landscape around the subject, making them less faithful to reality from a strict documentary perspective, and at the same time more faithful to reality because they can describe not only the scene itself but also the emotions of the moment.

In this sense, manipulating the images posted on social networks through the use of more or less intrusive tools necessarily alters the characteristics of the photo itself, making it less truthful to material reality but more truthful to all those intangible characteristics, such as emotions and feelings, that can materialize and be expressed through it. Filters, and photo manipulation in general, are at the core of the functioning of social networks and thus of our daily practice within them. They are not

¹³⁵ Ernst H. Gombrich, 2021, op. cit., p.564

expedients used to hide something but, instead, used to reveal everything that would otherwise remain hidden.

3.1 Social networks as places dominated by manipulation

Image manipulation is often attributed to digital photography, especially concerning the photos posted on social media. In reality, this phenomenon began much earlier but it has simply become more evident and pronounced with new technologies. Returning to the origins of this phenomenon, one could argue that the very ability to decide one's pose in a self-portrait, and therefore how to represent himself, embodies a concept fundamental to the function of filters: it is essentially a way to manipulate the image that is about to be captured or portrayed. On this subject, Amelia Jones notes in reference to some photographic self-portraits that «the artist performs her body reiteratively such that the artistic subject (who is both author of the image and the figure in the image) is overtly enacted as representation»¹³⁶. Thus, the artist's body performs within the shot and positions itself in the space, in order to create a representation of that particular sensation that the artist want to express through the image. In this sense, image manipulation and its intended expression are already present even before the shot is taken. In his study around selfie, Adam Levin notes that «while the performance described by Barthes remained relatively constrained and well-defined (an instant, a pose, a posture, a place, a time, a capture), that of a Polaroid is indefinite, with actors posing, capturing, reviewing, reposing, recapturing, and reviewing, potentially ad infinitum»¹³⁷. Referring to the phenomenon of Polaroids, he emphasizes that the actions taken to capture the photo, i.e., posing, capturing, reviewing, occur sequentially and can repeat almost infinitely. This rationale extends to digital photography in general, where filters are among the elements of performativity, including the pose, location, time, and so elements that can be modified and controlled.

Following the evolution of representational methods explained in the first chapter, it becomes clear that the ability to manipulate images has evolved alongside them. Considering the earliest method of self-representation, the self-portrait, it is the painter who decides how to portray themselves and the scene. Caricatures existed as well, which, despite being based on the subject's representation, completely distorted and modified it. With the advent of photography, the image continued to be manipulated. Photographers could not only control technical elements that varied from photo to photo, such as shutter speed and aperture; but also they could modify photos, during development

¹³⁶ Jones, Amelia, "The Eternal Return: Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment", in *Signs*, 27(4), 2002, p.952

¹³⁷ Adam Levin, 2014, op. cit., p. 12

and post-production moments, using acids or specific techniques that altered the print or enlarged the photos.

When analog photography was replaced by digital photography, the techniques also transitioned to digital. In 1974, Bryce Bayer invented a filter that allowed photographs to be colored: his checkerboard-like filter, called the Bayer pattern, enabled digital cameras to capture vivid color images. The pattern consists of «a grid of four boxes — each a light-sensitive element formed on a silicon chip — with two diagonally placed green elements, one red element, and the fourth one blue. Light passing through the elements is filtered into an array of colors»¹³⁸.

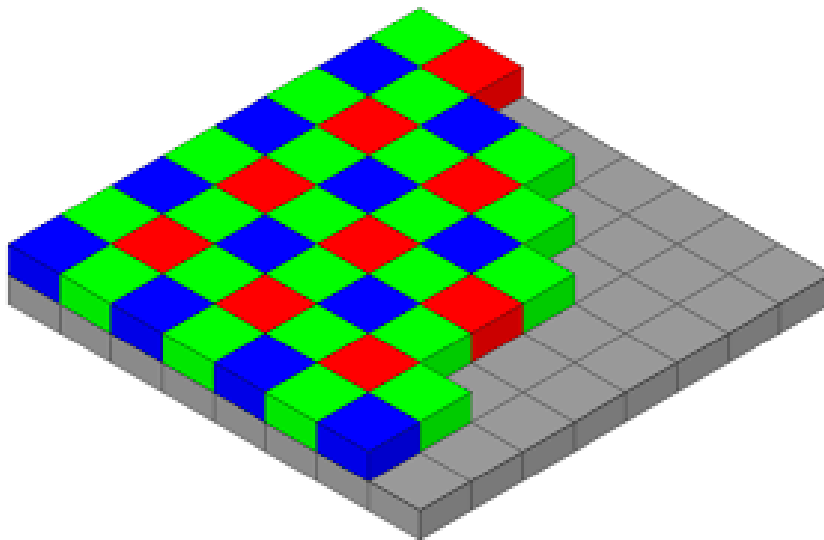


Figure 8: Bayern filter (Source: https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/digital_fotografering)

This was a significant invention that laid the groundwork for cameras to capture color images instead of black and white. Another crucial development in the history of filters occurred in 1987 when the Knoll brothers released Photoshop. From this moment on, the skills of modifying photos with chemicals in a lab were replaced by much simpler and more intuitive methods. Photoshop is a software that allows photo editing, and its basic use is accessible to everyone.

¹³⁸ Hevesi, Dennis, “Bryce Bayer, Inventor of a Filter to Make Color Digital Pictures, Dies at 83”, in *The New York Times*, 2012 <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/business/bryce-bayer-inventor-of-a-filter-to-make-color-digital-pictures-dies-at-83.html>

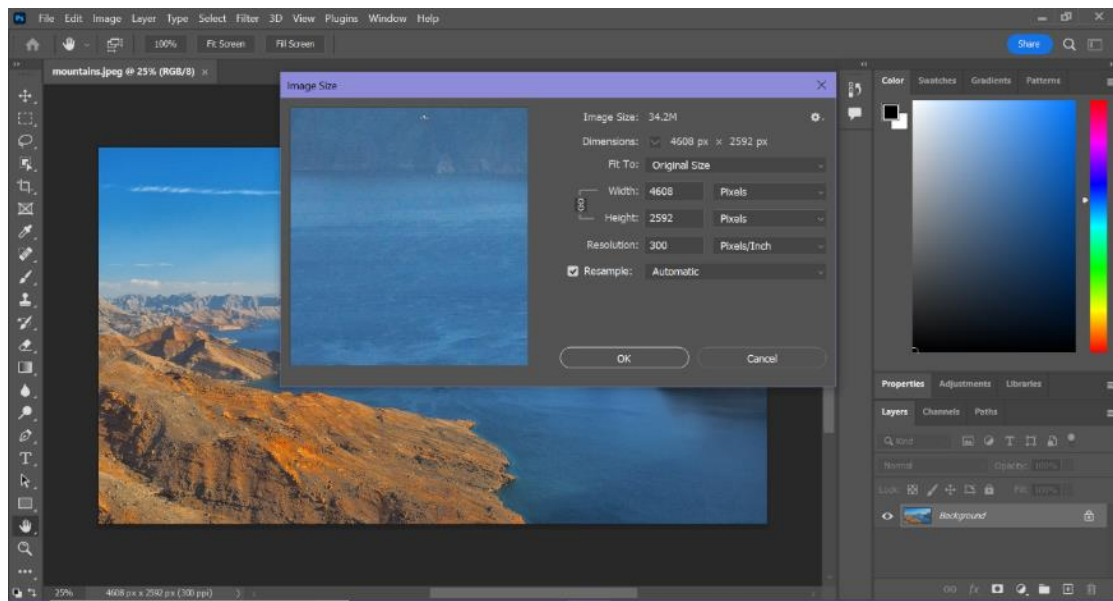


Figure 9: Photoshop working on an image (Source: <https://www.trustedreviews.com/how-to/resize-an-image-in-photoshop-4246490>)

The process became even simpler when these programs were integrated into mobile phones, making them tools for everyday use. Additionally, digital cameras began to incorporate some image-editing tools. As Edgar Gomez Cruz and Eric T. Meyer explain:

Camera companies, therefore, developed strategies to inscribe ‘knowledge programs’ and incorporate them in almost every digital camera. Although the programs to set the right combination for shooting common objects (portraits, landscapes, sports, etc.) were already incorporated in analog cameras, the design of digital cameras took this logic further and also incorporated ‘simulations’ of former combinations between processes and equipment (black and white, vignettes, ‘old photos’ looks, etc.)¹³⁹.

This indicates that cameras, too, were influenced by the need to modify photos instantly: initially allowing photographers to adjust only the elements that determined the success of a shot, now they could also modify photos through a grid with various shooting options and colored filters. The most direct method for image manipulation, however, remains the apps available on mobile phones. When in 2008, iPhone created a software development kit that made the use of filters accessible to everyone, any social application (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram) began offering the opportunity to edit photos both during and after shooting. «A new media object is subject to algorithmic manipulation. For instance, by applying appropriate algorithms, we can automatically remove ‘noise’ from a photograph, improve its contrast, locate the edges of the shapes, or change its proportions. In short, media becomes programmable»¹⁴⁰. Thus, media are manipulable because they

¹³⁹ Cruz, Edgar Gomez, Meyer, Eric T., “Creation and Control in the Photographic Process: iPhones and the emerging fifth moment of photography”, in *Photographies*, n.5(2), 2012, pp. 213-214

¹⁴⁰ Lev Manovich, 2001, op. cit., p.27

are programmable. Referring to the consideration in the first chapter, where phones are defined as extensions of our arm, it can be said that the inclusion of filters within the range of tools provided by this medium only reinforces this concept. Indeed, Theresa M. Senft explains that

The photographer holds in some way the camera to see the physical skin of her face, laying the camera's eye on top of her own. Satisfied with this overlap of the eyes, the photographer touches her device to shoot. She then manipulates the image with the fingers, hand once again in dialogue with her eyes, not so much for verification that what she once saw on her screen is what now appears, but for verification that what she sees after crops and filters is what she now desires. When she feels the photo sees what she wants, she then touches the device again to save it¹⁴¹.

In describing every step and movement involved in the shot of a photo, she emphasizes the perpetual exchange between eyes and hands. It has been already specified that the fit between the MSD and the user determines the transition to a tactile vision, and what Theresa M. Senft says makes us reflect even more that eyes and hands not only interact when the photo is taken but also when it is manipulated. The vision becomes even more tactile because the cooperation between hands and eyes extends throughout the entire image creation process: the final photo is achieved only when, after applying a series of filters and modifying some photo characteristics through the touch screen, we see and perceive what we want to communicate.

If we were to categorize the ways we can manipulate an image posted online, we can create two groups: manipulation during production and manipulation during post-production. The first consists of pose, location, time, etc., all variables that can be controlled during the shot, which essentially apply to all self-representational methods regardless of the technology they rely on. The seconds are manipulations that arise from technological discoveries and consist of filters, colors, etc. Finally, another category can be identified: manipulations required by the media themselves, meaning all the changes made to the image to meet the required parameters in order to be published. All these ways of modifying our self-representation are recognized by everyone and, except in highly professional contexts, accessible to all. Therefore, what unifies them is the fact that we are all aware of the existence of tools aimed at manipulating images. Actually, the social apps utilized on a daily basis are the ones that include image editing and manipulation features, so it is impossible not to realize that the image posted has been subjected to manipulation processes. For example, Instagram users can manipulate images before uploading them with a variety of techniques such as cropping, filters, and effects. Additionally, another instance of manipulation is the ability to alter the templates

¹⁴¹ Senft, Theresa M., *The Skin of the Selfie*, in Zarinbal, Shahin, Michalskaja, Sinaida, *Ego Update*, NRW Forum, Dusseldorf 2015, p.138

that are offered by online social media platforms. Each of these techniques offers a creative way to build one's online image.

3.2 Digital Filters and Their Influence on the Perception of the Created Image

On social platforms, there are plenty of ways users can modify their images and videos. For instance, on Instagram, when a user wants to publish a post, they can choose to upload their content in the 1:1 format, the 4:5 vertical format, or the 16:9 horizontal format.

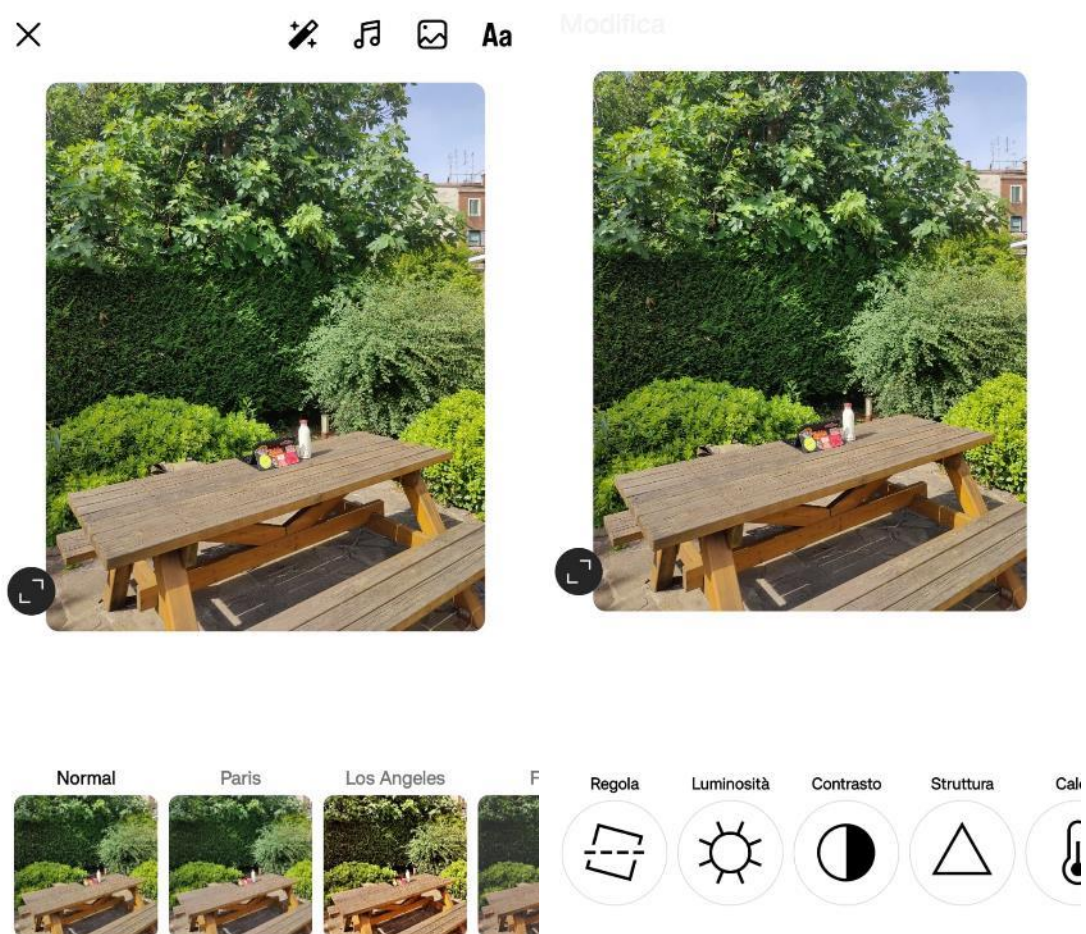


Figure 10: Modifiable settings on Instagram when posting a photo

Afterward, they can adjust the photo's characteristics such as brightness, contrast, saturation, and shadows, apply color filters, or even overlay another photo on the selected one. As for stories, the required format is 9:16. Stories allow for more extensive photo modifications, as users can add text, music, location tags, mentions, GIFs, avatars, hashtags, and more after taking the photo. Since stories are based on the characteristic of immediacy, users can also apply effects and filters to the camera, allowing them to see themselves on the screen with these elements already overlaid on their face. This means that every Instagram user knows which tools are available to modify their photos and

they understands that these tools can be used by other users as well, indicating that the posted photos are potentially manipulated. As Kris Fallon notes, «in Instagram, one expects the images to be manipulated. The app invites users to apply filters and crop the image before sending it as one of the procedural steps for posting»¹⁴². This means that everyone can assume that Instagram photos have been manipulated, since the photos must have been at least cropped to fit the app's required formats.

The study project conducted by Christine Lavrence and Carolina Cambre on digital filters¹⁴³ demonstrated that «when looking at selfies of others there is often a priori assumption that filtering has been applied, whether conspicuously or not, to the extent that visual tune-ups have become central to the genre itself»¹⁴⁴. This statement shows that when we view images posted on social networks, we are fully aware that these images might have been edited and thus manipulated. There may be cases where photos are subtly manipulated so that the viewer does not notice, but this way of using filters does not fall within the phenomenon I intend to investigate, which is how the use of filters adds value to the simple image.

The use of filters also varies depending on who uses them. The study by Saeideh Bakshi, David A. Shamma, Lyndon Kennedy, and Eric Gilbert distinguishes between serious photographers, who use filters to enhance the quality of their photos and correct any errors; and casual photographers, who use them to make their photos look nicer, more fun, and unique for posting. They identify five categories for the use of filters: improving aesthetics, adding vintage effects, highlighting objects, manipulating colors, and making the photos appear more fun and unique. Additionally, they demonstrate that the common opinion is positive towards the use of filters. In fact, «many of the participants in the qualitative study mentioned that they prefer filters that bring out contrast more often [...] filters with warm temperature significantly increase the number of comments and their effect on the number of views is also positive»¹⁴⁵. This research project highlights that the use of digital filters and photo manipulation is a process so democratized that it is accepted by the public, which has even developed a preference for photos edited according to certain parameters rather than others.

¹⁴² Kris Fallon, 2011, op. cit., p.111

¹⁴³ The study was based on 12 focus groups and aimed to investigate how users edit their selfies, imagine potential audiences, interact with, and perceive the filtering behaviors of others.

¹⁴⁴ Cambre, Carolina, Lavrence, Christine, “Do I look like my selfie?: Filters and the Digital-Forensic Gaze”, in *Social Media + Society*, n. 6(4), 2020, p.1

¹⁴⁵ Bakshi, Saeideh, Gilbert, Eric, Shamma, David Ayman, Kennedy, Lyndon, “Why We Filter Our Photos and How It Impacts Engagement”, in *Proceedings of the Ninth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, n.9(1), 2015, p.19

In the context of edited photos, it is defined the digital forensic gaze, where forensic means (from Latin) belonging to public discussion. «When looking at selfies, the use of filters was usually presumed, and deciphering authenticity is integral to what drives looking practices. This habituated practice of scrutinizing selfies, the digital-forensic gaze, is at least partially animated by decoding the filtration effects»¹⁴⁶. This means that not only the presence of digital filters is publicly recognized, but also that, through the digital forensic gaze, the image is perceived as real. Thus, this way of viewing images demonstrates that, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, a modified photo does not imply a false representation of reality, but a true representation of reality, albeit distorted according to what one wants to communicate.

3.3 Filters as Emotions' Revealers

In the previous chapter, we established that every image represents a subject that, beyond its physical presence, possesses an essence (which I have named "volto"). According to Ernst van Alphen,

The portrait brings with it two referents. The first is the portrayed as body, as material form. The second is the essence of the sitter, her/his unique authenticity. Within the traditional notion of the portrait, it is a truism to say that the strength of a portrait is being judged in relation to this supposed essence, not in relation to the looks of a person. [...] Camera work is not the traditional portrayer's ideal, but its failure, because the essential quality of the sitter can only be caught by the artist, not by the camera¹⁴⁷.

Whilst Ernst van Alphen's statement regarding the importance of capturing the subject's interiority when creating an image can be valid, as this allows the viewer to perceive the subject's essence, I do not concur with the notion that the camera is incapable of this. It is undoubtedly a more immediate process in painting, where the artist can express the intangible through their art; I believe that the same logic applies to photography, and that this is achievable through the use of filters. It is necessary to find the right balance between descriptive representation and creative interpretation. It is important to understand that one does not exclude the other, but that a high level of self-representation requires both. This coexistence is possible through photography, which no longer implies merely capturing what is in the frame, but also a process of filling the image with meaning through various tools. The balance between representation and interpretation is found in what Kris Fallon asserts:

The filtering process introduces an effective, expressive dimension to the image. This decreases its documentary value as an unaltered record of what existed before the camera but increases its capacity to capture the desires and

¹⁴⁶ Carolina Cambre, Christine Lavrence, 2020, op. cit., p.5

¹⁴⁷ Alphen, Ernest van, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in *Interfaces: Portraiture and Communication*, Madrid 2001, p.49

moods of its author. Filtered images do not claim 'this is how it looked' but rather 'how I wanted it to look' or 'how I felt it looked'¹⁴⁸.

While a simple self-portrait that represents only the exterior of a person tells us how they appear and nothing more, a manipulated portrait can convey the interiority of that person, helping us understand who they are and their personality. Taking a photo is not enough for self-representation; it is necessary to imbue it with the subject's interiority. As Jill Walker states, «Simply taking the photographs doesn't complete the process of self-exploration. In these cases, the photographs are selected and then manipulated digitally. Then, they are presented in a group, not individually»¹⁴⁹.

The word “filter” is often associated with the concept of removal, but they can also add something. In my view, a filter does not obscure or detract from the photo's authenticity, but rather adds an emotional aspect that was not there before. Specifically, when we modify the colors of an image or apply a filter that alters them, we are able to express certain emotions. It is well-known that each color can be associated with a meaning, as each one is capable of expressing particular emotions and feelings. Consequently, by using certain colors and images, each Instagram user can impart a specific mood to their posts, allowing viewers to perceive the same emotions¹⁵⁰. Filters can be used to eliminate what we consider imperfections in the photo, but they can also be used, for example, to increase color saturation or add borders or vignettes. Filters «facilitate playful virtual ‘dress up’ while also producing coded self-representations»¹⁵¹. They represent a way to explore oneself and understand how to best represent oneself. It is particularly interesting to consider whether the way we post and manipulate images on social media can help identify a person's personality traits. One of the first studies on this was conducted by Jennifer Goldbeck, Cristina Robles, and Karen Turner, who demonstrated that the Big Five personality traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) can be predicted through information published on Facebook¹⁵². More specifically, referring to images posted on social media, Bruce Ferwenda, Markus Schedl, and Marko Tkalcic conducted a study where they «tried to infer personality traits from the way users take pictures and apply filters to them»¹⁵³. Social media makes it easy to modify photos and apply filters, allowing users to express themselves

¹⁴⁸ Fallon, Kris, 2011, op. cit., p.111

¹⁴⁹ Jill Walker, 2005, op. cit., p. 5

¹⁵⁰ Manovich, Lev, *Instagram and Contemporary Image*, 2017, p. 71-113

<http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image>

¹⁵¹ Carolina Cambre, Christine Lavrence, 2020, op. cit., p.3

¹⁵² Golbeck, Jennifer, Robles, Cristina, Turner, Karen, “Predicting Personality with Social Media,” in *CHI: Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2011, pp.253-262

¹⁵³ Ferwenda, Bruce, Schedl, Markus, Tkalcic, Marko, “Predicting Personality Traits with Instagram Pictures,” in *Proceedings of the 3rd Workshop on Emotions and Personality in Personalized Systems*, 2015, p.7

according to their personal style and stand out from the crowd. In a case study on Instagram users, it was demonstrated that it is possible to identify users' personality traits based on their posted photos, particularly regarding openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. Another associated study delved deeper into the matter by focusing on two types of features of photos posted on Instagram: color-based (e.g., brightness, saturation, pleasure-arousal-dominance-hue) and content-based features (e.g., architecture, body parts, clothing, music instruments, art, etc.). According to the study, these characteristics prove to be good predictors of the personality of the user who posted the images¹⁵⁴. With these three studies I do not want to state that it is possible to know a person through what he posts on social media, but that it is simply possible to draw information about his personality from his posts. These three studies demonstrate that there is indeed a connection between what we post on social media and our personality, confirming that the way we manipulate our images through filters helps communicate the essence of ourselves, creating an online image that is as faithful to our essence as much as possible.

However, it is important to specify that not everyone uses filters for the same reasons. Filters are not always employed in the ways previously explained, namely to best express the identity of the subject depicted in the image. Some individuals use filters to modify their image so that it conforms to specific standards (or stereotypes) of beauty, sociability, and desirability. As explained in chapter 2, society tends to sexualize the image of the female body, making it merely an object of desire and leading women and girls to question their own bodies and, consequently, their representations. Moreover, there is often a tendency to appear as conforming to a certain stereotype and as fitting to a certain standard just to be a member of a virtual community. In this regard, Lev Manovich explains that

Cultural identity today is established via small variations and differences. [...] If you describe yourself as “traveler, blogger, photographer”, you immediately position yourself within a really big “Instagram class”. [...] If a young person identifies with any subculture, this excludes her/him from the “mainstream” (if it exists in given place) or a few common identities. But at the same time, the person now belongs to another group, i.e. the chosen subculture. So instead of creating a unique identity, the person gets locked in a group identity¹⁵⁵.

With the possibility of modifying images through digital filters, this issue escalates into what is defined as digitized dysmorphia, which «manifests through the digital image, as the altering of supposedly undesirable parts of the self through modifying and fixing the visual and virtual

¹⁵⁴ Ferwenda, Bruce, Tkalcic, Marko, “Predicting Users’ Personality from Instagram Pictures: Using Visual and/or Content Features?” in *Proceedings of the 26th Conference on User Modeling, Adaptation, and Personalization*, 2018, pp.157-161

¹⁵⁵ Lev Manovich, 2017, op. cit., pp. 89-90

appearance of an individual's self through various apps»¹⁵⁶. In this sense, filters acquire a function of depersonalization: users employ them to standardize and blend in with the masses, with the intent, for example, of eliminating skin imperfections or altering facial features in relation to standard beauty norms or applying make-up according to trends. Standardization of features is the outcome of anxiety-provoking demands originating from established beauty standards, which are considered essential for social acceptance. Digital filters help to assist this adapting process: «the proprioception of the face no longer passes through the mirror but through the smartphone, reducing to the pathological need to alter one's appearance through specific filters in search of the perfect selfie»¹⁵⁷. People use digital filters in order to escape the discomfort caused by beauty standards, that drive us to find imperfections in our appearance, and by social pressure, that make us feel inadequate. They also believe that projecting a filtered version of themselves will win them acceptance from others. Isabelle Coy-Dibley poses a critical question in this context:

Nowadays, particularly in Western culture, we can digitally alter ourselves through Photoshop and apps such as Perfect365¹⁵⁸, producing our own notions of normativity. Not only do we critique our body in mirrors, but now we can digitize our dysmorphia by virtually modifying what we dislike, creating “perfect” selves instead. How do these online ideal images affect women's relationship to their material bodies? Do these digital images provide the freedom to express a self that would otherwise be overlooked, or simply accentuate the disparity between female bodies and the images women feel they must embody?¹⁵⁹

The answer to this complex question must consider several factors involved in self-representation: we cannot deny that there are anthropological reasons why women have succumbed to societal pressure to conform to these specific standards. «While women compete with men in employment, education, and society, in return, they are expected to adhere to feminine protocols to aesthetically please the male gaze within a public sphere that was originally perceived as his»¹⁶⁰, thus subjecting them to the constant concern of being evaluated not for their professional and intellectual qualities but for their aesthetic attributes, needing to meet those specific standards. Digital filters provide an easy escape from these standards, as it becomes simple to modify one's image to conform to them. The problem arises when this self-distortion is so influenced that it causes distress. In 2019, Facebook banned the use of distortion effects due to a widespread social debate identifying them as potentially harmful: «Awareness of body dysmorphia was rising, and a filter called FixMe, which allowed users

¹⁵⁶ Coy-Dibley, Isabelle, “Digitized Dysmorphia of the Female Body: The Re/disfigurement of the Image,” in *Palgrave Communications*, n.2(1), 2016

¹⁵⁷ Surace, Bruno, “Culture of the Face and Sociosemiotics of Selfie Dysmorphia,” in *Filosofi(e) semiotiche*, n.7(2), 2020, p.60

¹⁵⁸ Perfect365 is an application that won the 2012 CES award for innovation in design and engineering, allowing users to modify their face and makeup to conform to certain beauty standards.

¹⁵⁹ Isabelle Coy-Dibley, 2016, op. cit.

¹⁶⁰ Isabelle Coy-Dibley, 2016, op. cit.

to mark up their faces as a cosmetic surgeon might, had sparked a surge of criticism for encouraging plastic surgery»¹⁶¹. Filters that modify facial features are still allowed, while only those explicitly promoting surgical interventions are banned. These filters merely normalize online body-shaming. Isabelle Coy-Dibley concludes by explaining that, in her view, digitized dysmorphia can be seen both as an obstacle and a liberation for women, as the ability to modify images allows their online body to escape societal pressures from which the material body cannot. However, this is only a partial liberation: while the online body may escape, the material body remains suffocated by social pressure, concerned that it cannot resemble the online one. Every time a woman alters her image, regardless of the purpose of this manipulation, she takes control of her image, but these can happen in different ways. Even if she manages to silence beauty standards by manipulating her online image, she doesn't succeed in fighting against the problem at its roots. Modifying one's image to meet standard norms means escaping social pressure and anxiety but not going against the female stereotype imposed by the male gaze.

Unfortunately, the issue extends further: beauty standards also entail discrimination not only of women relative to men but also of black women relative to other women. Beauty standards imply a series of highly racialized situations: beauty standards always refer to white women, and often digital filters, designed for white women, do not apply correctly to black women, excluding them once again from the narrative. The same reasoning applies inversely: there are filters that aim to darken the skin of users, giving them an “exotic look”. These filters are highly offensive, as they imply that users can wear dark skin like a simple accessory, completely ignoring all the complications that those born with dark skin constantly face. In this regard, Vaani Kaur, a 29-year-old teacher and activist from Harrow, referring to the “choco skin” filter, states that «Having a filter to darken yourself or change your ethnicity for a trend is not acceptable when racial and cultural discrimination are still very real problems»¹⁶². Wearing dark skin, as if it were an accessory, underscores that we are in a racist society, indifferent to the fact that in most cases, being born with dark skin implies a series of daily discriminations, both in real life and online.

Everyone is free to construct their online image as they prefer, using the tools provided by platforms in the manner they deem appropriate. This also means that it is up to us to decide where to position ourselves regarding these issues. When someone modifies their body exclusively to conform to certain beauty standards, they are using tools for image manipulation (such as filters) and therefore their agency over images to change just the outside of who they are. On the other hand, genuine image

¹⁶¹ Ryan-Mosley, Tate, “Beauty Filters Are Changing the Way Young Girls See Themselves,” in *MIT Technology Review*, 2021

¹⁶² Lee, Sarah, “Instagram Filters: ‘Our Skin is for Life, Not for Likes,’” in *BBC News*, 2020

re-appropriation occurs when we choose to seize total control over the means at our disposal and hack them to materialize our ideas and give essence to our self-portrait.

3.4 The Case Study: Hacking the image with Corinne Mazzoli

Reviewing the topics covered in these three chapters, it is evident how online self-representation and the methods for constructing one's identity on the web have significantly evolved over time. New technologies have brought about major changes in how images are created: when a picture is taken, it is done with the intent of posting it on social media. The image becomes interconnected, representing a way to communicate with others. It becomes a language to present oneself through one's face or any other subject that defines one's personality. Self-representation is no longer about depicting one's face or body; it is about giving form to one's essence. This essence takes shape through the mask one decides to wear, which, in the case of social media, is one's personal profile. This mask can highlight certain characteristics and conceal others, depending on the context and the user's decisions. Additionally, digital filters are used to convey further information. All these choices are in our hands, as we all have the power to decide how to represent ourselves. Social media, therefore, become places where, through the hacking of available tools, everyone can reclaim their image. These concepts can be observed in the artistic practice of Corinne Mazzoli, a Venice-based visual artist and researcher.

Corinne Mazzoli, born in La Spezia in 1984, is a visual artist and researcher. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, she earned a Master's degree in Visual Arts Design and Production from IUAV University in Venice, where she currently lives and works. In addition to the Ph. D. at the Bicocca University of Milan, she focuses on her artistic practice based on video, photography, installations, and performances. Her work addresses identity constructs and gender stereotypes concerning the representation of the female body. Her artistic practice centers on the concept of user instructions, particularly tutorials, a tool she hacks to define the concept of the counter-tutorial, as in her latest publication.

The idea of exploring the unconventional use of tutorials stemmed from her first one, *How to Get a Thigh Gap* (2013), created during her residency program at the Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation, for the *Cammina con l'arte* (Walk with art) prize, in collaboration with Stonefly, a shoe manufacturing company based in the Treviso area. Her artistic research was influenced by leg braces

designed by Austrian pedagogue Daniel Gottlob Moritz Schreber¹⁶³. From this emerged the idea to create an accessory for the legs that, instead of aiding movement, prevented it. Collaborating with Stonefly workers, Mazzoli created a device made of metal and straps. After its construction, she filmed the video. She named it as a tutorial, reflecting on the word "tutor" as something that aids, although what she created impeded movement. Instead, the idea of the thigh gap recalls the obsession of the time (not so dissimilar to what exists today) to fit into the beauty standards, which consisted in desiring perfect legs in relation to what was the stereotyped aesthetic-related conception of some models, such as Cara Delevigne. This tutorial, which actually teaches nothing since the created accessory is unusable and doesn't help achieving a thigh gap, marks the beginning of a characteristic theme in Mazzoli's work: hacking the tools, particularly the tutorial format, to subvert norms and provoke reflection on beauty standards. Creating a video tutorial that is supposed to teach how to achieve a thigh gap, but actually presents an unusual tool that impede you even to walk, is a way of subverting the rules and making people think about this obsession to have to fit into the beauty standards. The inspiration from Schreber's violent tools underscores the violence women endure to be socially acceptable, prompting deeper contemplation on the female body's image.



Figure 11: Corinne Mazzoli, TUTORIAL#1: How to get a Thigh Gap, still from video, 2013

¹⁶³ Daniel Gottlob Moritz Schreber was a pedagogue, practicing black pedagogy, meaning that he educated children through violence and corporal restraint. In addition to doing daily physical exercises and having corporal punishments, he used special devices (mainly on his own children), such as leg-tighteners.

This first counter-tutorial prompted the artist to explore the concept and the format further. Her second tutorial, *How to Cruise with a Bruise* (2014), was inspired by daily life experiences, prompting her to reflect on gender differences and public perceptions of a bruised face. This period also saw two significant events: a Moroccan TV tutorial on concealing bruises, which sparked outrage for normalizing the hiding of domestic violence marks, and Boy George's appearance with faux bruising make-up at the BRIT Awards. Although both the news were about the showing/hiding of a bruise on the face, they had been reported in two opposite ways, because in the first case the subject were female, in the second one male. The resulting reflection is that the way a bruise is perceived is influenced by the gender and background of the "victim".

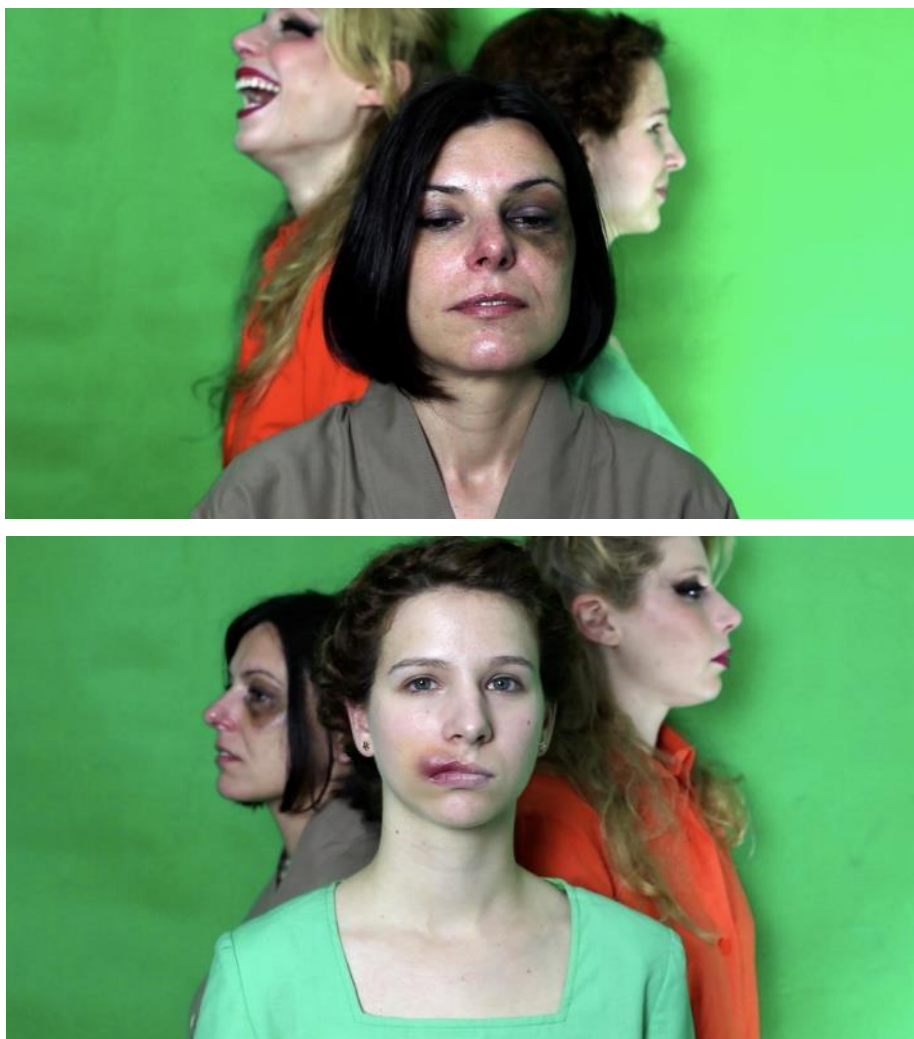


Figure 12: Corinne Mazzoli, *TUTORIAL#2: How to Cruise with a Bruise*, still da video, 2014

Again, the intention is to overturn: the everyday practice of makeup is hacked to reverse the logic of concealment and public display of the private. Mazzoli's performance involved a makeup session in a cinematic backstage setting: demonstrators showed how to create a bruise makeup and how to flaunt it, while the practitioners were trying to reproduce it. This durational performance lasted around three

hours and included a musician that was part of the performance. The performance, besides exploring media hacking and reflections on the female body, also delved into the themes of masks and the show/conceal dynamic. The bruise makeup acted as a filter, applied to the face to prompt reflections on gender and racial differences.

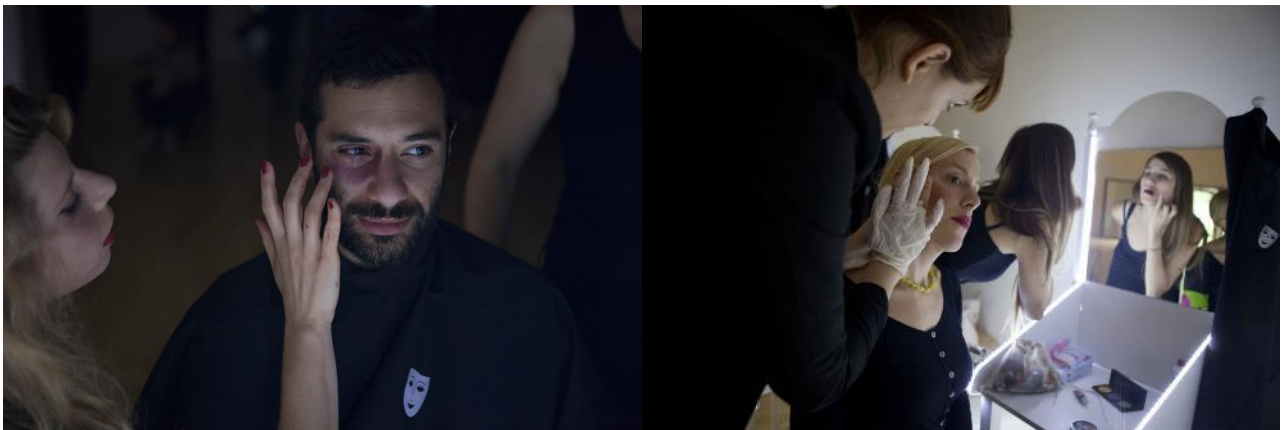


Figure 13: Corinne Mazzoli, *TUTORIAL#2: How to Cruise with a Bruise*, durational performance, Centrale Fies, 2014. Ph Luca Pili

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Mazzoli revisited the tutorial concept, creating a triptych of non-conventional tutorials: in this case, the intention to overturn the homogenizing structure of the instructions for use leads one to reflect on current events and the needs that have arisen as a result of the pandemic. *How to Pretend to Be Out in Nature* (2020) addresses the need to reconnect with nature post-isolation.



Figure 14: Corinne Mazzoli, *Non-Conventional Tutorials: How to Pretend To Be Out in Nature*, still from video 27", March 2020

How to Hide From Neighbours (2020) teaches how to camouflage with plants to avoid nosy neighbors using a mask, while *How to Befriend Your Neighbours* (2020) features also a mask, resembling a tropical plant or carnivorous creature, but for the opposite reasons.

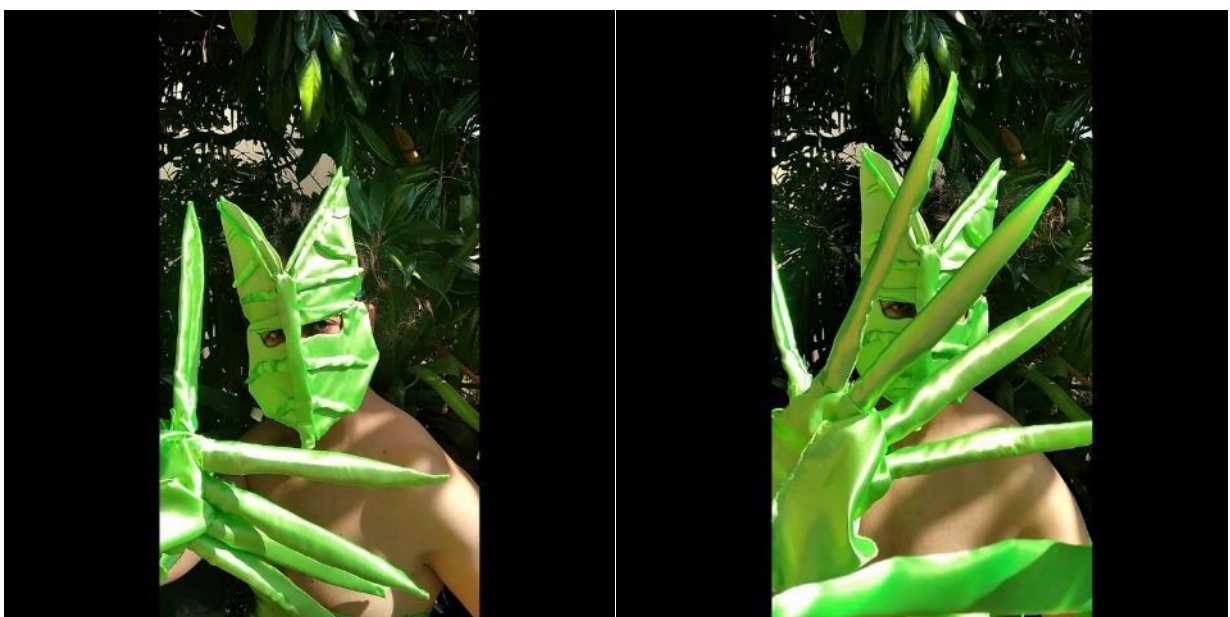


Figure 15: Corinne Mazzoli, *Non-Conventional Tutorials: How to Hide From Neighbours*, still from video, March 2020



Figure 16: Corinne Mazzoli, *Non-Conventional Tutorials: How to Befriend Your Neighbours*, photo, April 2020. Ph Luca Pili

The concept of mask, in this triptych, is highlighted: in each video, the artist makes use of a mask that leads to covering/discovering one's face, with the intent of becoming visible/invisible to one's neighbors. The idea of mask is reinforced especially online (where most of our lives were developed in the COVID-19 period), as on social platforms it becomes easier to show off or disappear.

The final counter-tutorial, *How to Customize Yourself* (2021), combines video creation with reflections from educational workshops that the artist conducted in various contexts. This video is the result of reflections done in the pandemic period: spending a lot of time on social media, it was easy to come across plotting and conspiracy theories. For example, one on reddit in which an attempt was made (with confusing results) to draw parallels between COVID-19 masks as a means of control and ritual tribal masks used for possession. Viral conspiracy theories become outfits and accessories that customize the protagonist. Once again, hacking the tutorial format constructs a paradoxical narrative that doesn't teach but rather investigates the self, and the differences in representation between individual and community, the desires and limitations imposed by social media, mirroring the limits and barriers of our society.



Figure 17: Corinne Mazzoli, *How to Customise Yourself*, still from video, 2021

The idea was influenced by a workshop made in the same year in Gallarate, which was the result of a collaboration between the MA*GA Museum and G. Falcone High School. For example, the idea of the “Mind Control” mask came from a challenge carried out among the students that consisted in

having to wear as many masks as possible; one girl managed to overlap the masks on her face, creating a real mask, which the artist was inspired by in the video. Or again, the idea of having the character rotate on a platform while being customized comes from the tutorial made by Lorenzo Vergerio *Come essere punk* (How to be punk) (2021) within the same workshop, which reflects on youth identity and the importance of nonconformity.

Mazzoli's integration of educational workshops with her artistic practice characterizes her work. Workshops, requiring audience participation, echo the interactive nature of social platforms from where the tutorial tool derives. Artistic practice and pedagogical practice intertwine: if counter-tutorials should have the intention of teaching, but they do not; during workshops, the artist "teaches how to" not "teach how to", leading participants to reflect on their own identity and society. Her main workshop experiences, part of the *On Tutorials, Stereotypes and Body Visions* research, took place in Slovenia, Italy, and Mexico. These workshops encourage the creation of counter-tutorials to challenge the conformist and imitative nature of tutorials, addressing social empowerment and emancipation themes¹⁶⁴. The resulting videos focus on various themes based on the context and participants' age. The workshop held in Slovenia with University of Primorska students, in association with the Piran Coastal Galleries, primarily discussed on the commodification or constriction of body stereotypes, which is sometimes implied by the idea that one must be active on social media. Indeed, the video *Social World of a Walrus* (2022) by Maja Brus and Petja Škrubej make us think about the difficulty of separating the real life from the virtual one. They tell a story through Instagram-sized photos: a walrus, not reaching visibility online, gets lost in a sea of tears. Another interesting video is *Main Characters* (2022) by Tjaša Pobega, which opens with the phrase "How to spot the main characters", making us reflect that we have to learn to observe who is around us, because everyone could be the protagonist of our stories. At the Universidad Iberoamericana en Puebla in Mexico, the predominant topic was the obsession with the idealized image of a flawless and in shape body, that adheres to the standards of a capitalist society. The resulting videos are extremely personal: some discuss eating disorders and demonstrate ways to protest against the machismo and heteronormativity of our contemporary world.

¹⁶⁴ Mazzoli, Corinne, *Counter-Tutorials*, Krisis Publishing, Brescia 2024, pp.72-129

For example, a video that uses the concept of counter-tutorial to reflect on the stereotypes imposed by the male gaze is *Cómo gustarle a un hombre promedio heterosexual en 5 sencillos pasos* (How to Get an Average Straight Man to Like You in 5 Easy Steps) (2022), by Nicole Fernández De La Peña. In an ironic way, the woman follows the steps to behave according to the stereotypes, but it becomes increasingly rough, in order to symbolize the violence of the act of conformity.



Figure 18: Nicole Fernández De La Peña, *Cómo gustarle a un hombre promedio heterosexual en 5 sencillos pasos*, still from video, 2022

Corte y queda (Cut and fit) (2022) by Valeria Doménica Rosas Hernandez reflects on female stereotypes, but in this case related to socially imposed dietary regimens. The resulting eating disorders are treated through metaphors, among them the sculptural piece made of “forbidden” foods: chips and melted marshmallow.

In Italy, the workshop made in Trieste took place in the *Casa Internazionale delle Donne*, in cooperation with the CDCP (Comitato per i Diritti Civili delle Prostitute, Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes). The result was the production of a collective video *Superaccoglienza* (Hyper-reception) (2022), which stressed upon the theme of welcoming in the territory in both a positive and negative sense.

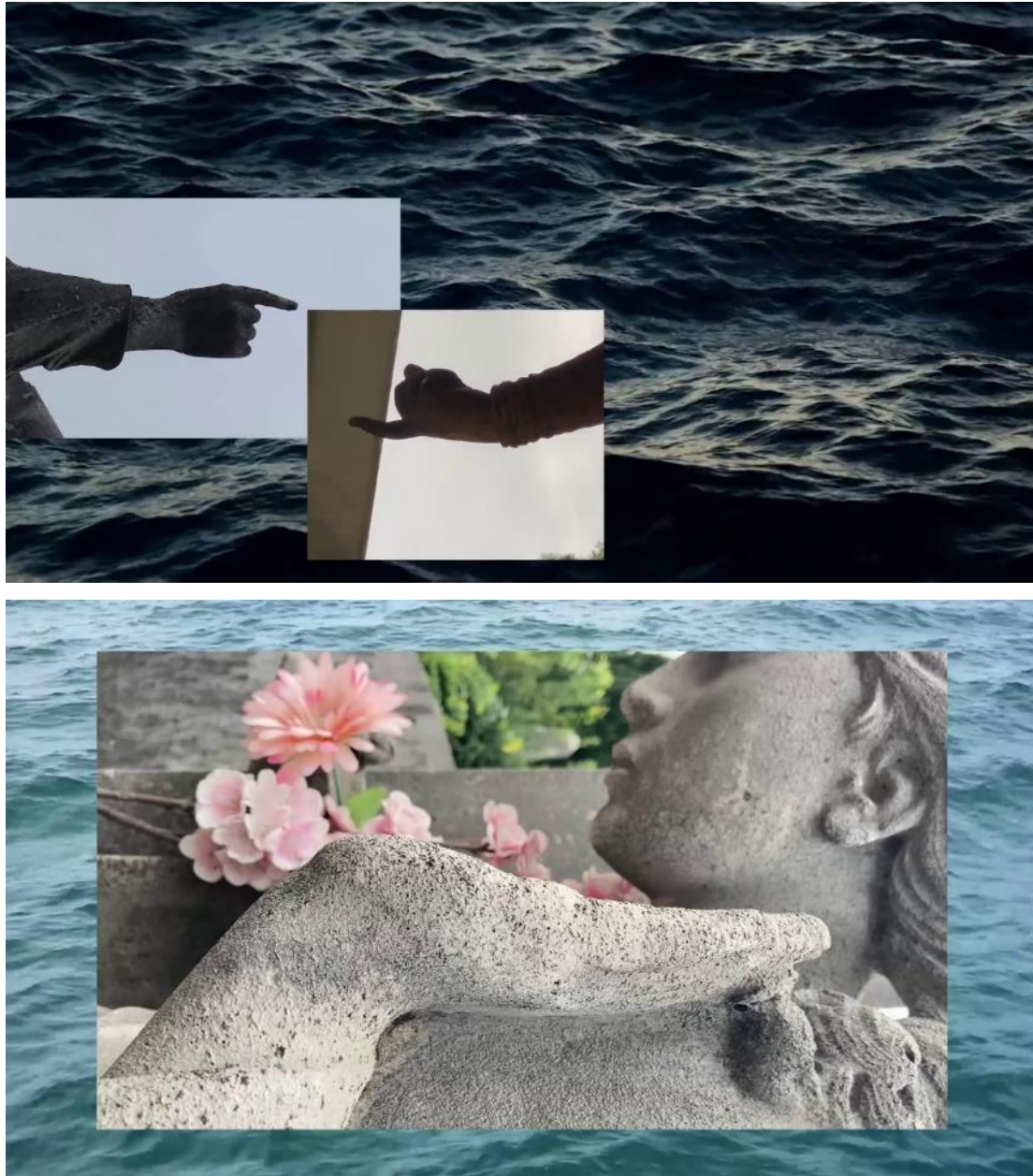


Figure 19: Mona Auerbach, Benedetta Bassi, Carlotta Benussi, Letonde Hermine Gbedo, Linda Pavanello, Barbara Vidakovic, *Superaccoglienza*, still from video, 2022.

However, the workshops held in Venice with students from Ca' Foscari University and in Gallarate with students from the G. Falcone High School focused on various themes, more or less personal. Francesca Baldi, Giulia D'Angoli, Jessica Frattarelli, Giovanni Pinna e Margherita Sonego, in *Catcalling* (2022) try to teach us “how to” not be catcalled, The reflection carried out by the boys is

that female defence mechanisms are often ineffective. Instead, *Find your feed* (2021) by Sofia Cattaneo e Elena Vignaroli takes up the theme of the feed as a means of expressing one's personality, inviting the viewer to find the feed that best suits him or her through an online quiz.

In both the artist's works and those resulting from her workshops, themes of online control, construction of one's identity on social media, and re-appropriation of the female image resonate, all expressed through the medium of the counter-tutorial. Corinne Mazzoli defines counter-tutorials as

videos that appear to have no overt educational intention, but which actually conceal a pedagogic pattern and can be considered tutorials. They frequently employ the how-to formula typical of instructional formats, while changing both the goal and the intended audience. Counter-tutorials are representative of identities or socio-political contexts, or they are made to describe certain fashions¹⁶⁵.

The tutorial is a tool accessible to everyone. It is a bottom up creative production technique that fits within the contemporary digital landscape, described in the first chapter, where interconnected images reign supreme. Online communication occurs through images, which often get lost among the many homogenized and conforming contents. These images are frequently uniform and flattened by adherence to established standards. By taking control of the tutorial tool, the artist transforms it into a counter-tutorial, paving the way for a bottom up practice that stands out from the crowd, becoming a tool of resistance: the repetitive and conformist gestures of tutorials are erased in favor of unexpected and highly personal actions. The tutorial tool is deconstructed to be used as an empowerment instrument. Originating from the practice of user instructions, the tutorial, with its typical "how to" formula, is intended to teach the viewer something; by subverting this concept, counter-tutorials do not teach us anything but instead make us reflect on deeper everyday life issues. Camouflaging themselves within the flood of online videos and images, counter-tutorials give visibility to causes that would otherwise go unnoticed, becoming a powerful tool for online and open-source protest. In this process of camouflage/visibility, the concept of the mask returns: through a kind of dissimulation, where counter-tutorials hide their true intent and pretend to teach something according to the characteristics of user instructions, they manage to transform themselves into highly visible surfaces, shedding light on issues of social critique. The themes expressed, even if socially critical, are always presented in the first person. These are highly personalized videos, starting from a reflection on the self and one's identity.

Corinne Mazzoli's art practice is something extremely related and applicable to everyday life. Through her art, the artist teaches us to re-gain our agency: counter-tutorials are tools through which we hack identity stereotypes so as to take full control of our image. Investigating the self through its

¹⁶⁵ Mazzoli, Corinne, *Counter-Tutorials*, Krisis Publishing, Brescia 2024, p.53

online representation within the limits imposed by social media means exploring one's identity within the boundaries set by society. There are always obstacles, and there are always ways to overcome them. Hacking is one of the methods at our disposal: hacking the tutorial medium becomes training for hacking life's challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

«Photography was once a form of art and a medium. Now, before our eyes, it attains the universality of language¹⁶⁶».

The key to the evolution in the conception and importance attributed to images lies, I believe, in considering them as a language, capable of expressing concepts and communicating with others. It is no coincidence that it has been demonstrated that new generations, particularly Gen Z, prefer images over words to express themselves, favoring the use of stickers and GIFs. Images thus become a valuable tool for expressing one's thoughts, transitioning from autobiography to self-representation, or better yet, to an intermedial approach that encompasses both. The instinct to present oneself transforms in the virtual environment into the instinct to create an image of oneself that best represents the self. This is a genuine creation of one's online identity, to be shaped according to the context and what one wishes to express. For this reason, one of the first concepts I wanted to outline in this thesis is that of the mask: a surface that makes our self visible. In the real world, our mask is none other than our face (and body), while in the virtual world, it becomes our online profile. As such, the latter is capable of delineating, through various tools, the aspects of our personality we wish to highlight. What is expressed by this mask can also be enhanced by the use of filters, which can add emotions and feelings, thereby enriching our self-representation. These are layers that, one atop the other, create a contact zone between the public and one's being, i.e., one's inner self, which, from intangible, becomes tangible. This process underscores how representing one's identity does not rely on one's aesthetic image but on one's essence. When self-representing in the social environment through our online profile, posting selfies is not enough in order to define us. Selfies do not fulfill the task of creating an image of ourselves that expresses who we are, and must therefore be accompanied by other forms of representation and expression. In this context, the *anti-selfie* genre emerges: photographs that, while not framing the subject's face, manage to represent them and show their participation in certain experiences and situations, making their profile coincide with their autobiography.

Just as in face-to-face presentations, interaction with others plays an important role in online self-representation, too. The virtual world is interconnected, where images are taken or created with the intent of being published and thus shared so that others can see them. There is a reciprocal relationship between the images and the network, each influencing the other with the goal that the

¹⁶⁶ Gunthert, André, *L'immagine condivisa. La fotografia digitale*, Contrasto, Roma 2016, p. 152

image created on social media coincides with the identity that can be perceived and understood by users. Crucial to this coincidence between the created image and the perceived image is full control over the first one. The perception others have of us is inevitably different from our self-perception, so it is important not to let others represent us, but to take control of the tools of representation and use them according to what we want to express. Despite social media being spaces where every user is perpetually monitored, they cannot be compared to Bentham's Panopticon because, in reality, they embody the dual role of the controlled and the controller. In this way, the concept of user interconnection is emphasized as I reflect on my posts while simultaneously viewing others through their posts. The power of the user lies in deciding what and how to post, so that others see them based on the characteristics they choose to display. In this regard, social networks constantly present the user with choices to personalize every element of their profile as much as possible. With the transition from the industrial society to the post-industrial society, there is a push to use technology for personalization and subjectivation. Our profiles are customized according to the characteristics of our self that we want to share with other users online.

However, all this must occur within certain constraints. Social networks are platforms where we are free to express ourselves, but this doesn't mean they do not have rules or restrictions. What truly frees our representation is the knowledge and acquisition of these rules, so we can master them and use them for our purposes. By taking control of the rules, we take control of our self-representation, freeing it from imposed constructs and turning it into an act of rebellion.

Adopting a gendered sensitivity, this thesis has tried to show how taking control of one's image is fundamental for all those women who want to take control of their body representation and rebel against societal stereotypes. This act of rebellion begins with the way women use mobile phones. Starting from a situation where they were considered as inferior to men and relegated to care work, women began using mobile phones out of necessity, later realizing that these devices could be a means to regain their voice, which is often silenced, express themselves, and take control of their identity. This act of reclamation is crucial, especially since for a long time (and still today) women have been represented through fetishized and sexualized images, from a male perspective that seeks to reduce them to objects. When, instead, women self-represent, they can dismantle these constructs and provide a representation of themselves free from stereotypes and preconceptions. Corinne Mazzoli belongs to that group of women who take on this task, through her artistic practice based on the concept of the counter-tutorial. Hacking the tutorial format she identifies a way to overcome obstacles: Corinne Mazzoli hacks the forma, teaching us to look for creative ways to respond to the obstacles imposed by society in life.

Given all this, I would say that the question posed in the title of this thesis is a complex one, to which it is possible to respond only through a contradiction. *Crafting Identity on Instagram: Authentic Expression or Manufactured Image?* As highlighted in this thesis, crafting our identity on Instagram as an authentic expression of who we are is possible precisely because we have the power to own the medium, its affordances, codes and languages in order to manufacture our own features.

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FIGURE INDEX

Figure 1: Piero della Francesca, The Duke and Duchess of Urbino Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza, 1473-1475 c., Oil on wood, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/aiva/46388716205).....	10
Figure 2: André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri, uncut Carte de Visite (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/32535532@N07/6125201227).....	11
Figure 3: “You press the button, we do the rest”, Kodak campaign for the Brownie model (Source: https://timelessmoon.getarchive.net/amp/media/you-press-the-button-we-do-the-rest-kodak-c5cf94).....	12
Figure 4: iPhone shooting a photograph (Source: https://www.pickpik.com/phone-iphone-iphone-camera-mobile-photography-hand-stadium-113227)	13
Figure 5: Van Gogh, Bedroom, 1888, oil on canvas, Van Gogh museum, Amsterdam (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/michelelovesart/3675898923)	27
Figure 6: Architectural explanation of the penitentiary Panopticon (Source: https://garystockbridge617.getarchive.net/media/penitentiary-panopticon-plan-430891)	41
Figure 7: Edvard Munch, The Scream, 1893, oil, tempera, pastel on cardboard, National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo (Source: https://www.needpix.com/photo/613158/edvard-munch-scream-painting-terror-nightmare-surrealism-fear-fright).....	57
Figure 8: Bayern filter (Source: https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/digital_fotografering).....	59
Figure 9: Photoshop working on an image (Source: https://www.trustedreviews.com/how-to/resize-an-image-in-photoshop-4246490).....	60
Figure 10: Modifiable settings on Instagram when posting a photo.....	62
Figure 11: Corinne Mazzoli, TUTORIAL#1: How to get a Thigh Gap, still from video, 2013	70
Figure 12: Corinne Mazzoli, TUTORIAL#2: How to Cruise with a Bruise, still da video, 2014.....	71
Figure 13: Corinne Mazzoli, TUTORIAL#2: How to Cruise with a Bruise, durational performance, Centrale Fies, 2014. Ph Luca Pili.....	72
Figure 14: Corinne Mazzoli, Non-Conventional Tutorials: How to Pretend To Be Out in Nature, still from video 27”, March 2020	73
Figure 15: Corinne Mazzoli, Non-Conventional Tutorials: How to Hide From Neighbours, still from video, March 2020	73
Figure 16: Corinne Mazzoli, Non-Conventional Tutorials: How to Befriend Your Neighbours, photo, April 2020. Ph Luca Pili.....	74
Figure 17: Corinne Mazzoli, How to Customise Yourself, still from video, 2021	75
Figure 18: Nicole Fernández De La Peña, Cómo gustarle a un hombre promedio heterosexual en 5 sencillos pasos, still from video, 2022	77
Figure 19: Mona Auerbach, Benedetta Bassi, Carlotta Benussi, Letonde Hermine Gbedo, Linda Pavanello, Barbara Vidakovic, Superaccoglienza, still from video, 2022.....	78

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