

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF SELF(IE)-PORTRAIT: BETWEEN THE SUBLIME AND THE BANAL

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ABSTRACT

The analogy between the myth of Narcissus, referred to as the intrinsic symbol of painting by Leon Battista Alberti; the typological value of self-portrait as an ontological and statutory reference; its value while metamorphosis of reality; and the self-representative phenomenon that Selfie translates – all this has to be established and requires due consideration. When dwelling on the contemporary Selfie we need to consider also the salvific dimension of this kind of self-representation mechanisms that have always been there. The value of image while self-awareness mechanism compels us to question the field of action where it is far more active – on social media. Its immanence is a true narcissistic affliction. The intrinsic and immediate value of image thus overlaps sign and word. The mechanisms of self-contemplation thus produced translate into a clear ontological impoverishment of reality. The Selfie does not prevent the subject's Kafkian metamorphosis, but renders reality vulgar, making it acceptable through both similarity and integration. Self-portrait and Selfie are thus the ancestral mechanisms of self-preservation. Its origin derives from narcissistic mechanisms that require a continuous desire to stand out socially. However, while the pictorial self-portrait translates into epistemic valuation of its author, Selfie delights in the vulgarization of the repetitive and banal gesture.

KEYWORDS

Self-Portrait | Selfie | Painting | Photography | Art History | Philosophy Of Art

SELF-REPRESENTATION AS A LIBERAL ACHIEVEMENT – THE "AGE OF PRIVILEGE"

Consequently, I used to tell my friends that the inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus, who was turned into a flower; for, as painting is the flower of all the arts, so the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool? (Alberti 2004, 61).

The artist is respected because he promotes the eternity of the memory of the "other" – and as such – is granted the exclusivity and glory of self-representation. Note, however, that its implementation also formalizes a clear epistemic conquest. By the mid-fifteenth century and before the advent of photography, the spell of self-representation forced painters to epistemologically harmonize three fundamental achievements: *verismo*; pictorial space; and social awareness. The development of the absolute mimesis of reality would thus have had as its primary objective the faithful and truthful representation of the individual. From the fusion of these three concepts will be born the self-portrait and the selfie of the artist.

Until the democratization of photography in the late nineteenth century, self-portrait was thus totally restricted to the territory of painters, but conditioned to three conditional reflexes: epistemic consciousness; social awareness; and narcissism. In the treatise *De Pictura* that Leon Battista Alberti published in 1435¹, the invention of painting is attributed precisely to Narcissus. Alberti raises this question when he refers precisely to the statutory conquest of painters, hitherto regarded as mere craftsmen. The reflection of this 'first' painter – paradoxically fatal and virtuous – would henceforth institute painting as a perennial reflection of human nature, and in particular of his cultivators – the artists. The mirrored surface of water thus constitutes for Alberti the ideal metaphor to illustrate the magna function of painting as a checker of identity (Alberti, 2004: 61). The first glimpse the painter observed was precisely his reflection – the painting thus translates in an inducer of self-awareness. The depiction and understanding of the outer "Self" thus led to the understanding of the workings of the universe where the self moves and operates. Its practice and conquest takes the form of epistemological mechanism: the subject who self-portrays himself pictorially knows himself visually outside

in but intellectually inside out. The pictorial self-portrait is thus intimately associated with self-awareness, but in an absolutely opposite way to the contemporary production of the selfie, a process through which the image undergoes an ontological cut between the portrayed object and the being that produces it.

The right to self-representation – as it means a clear intrusion into a sealed aulic world – is thus taken as an unparalleled and perennial liberal achievement. The artists, stripped of their statutes until the mid-fifteenth century, were the first to self-represent themselves in the works they then produced. The urgency of the artistic "Self" thus overlapped the existential smallness of the craftsman. Self-portrait thus assumes itself as an element of social integration in the sphere of those who command it. The Maecenas is portrayed because he pays, not because it is endowed with self-representation mechanisms. The early action of these mechanisms becomes particularly clear in the first images by three artists whose action played a preponderant role in the statutory affirmation of painters in the fifteenth century, namely through the creation of painted frontal self-portraits with a novelty – the artist directly confronting the observer of the work: see the paradigmatic case of the work *Raising of the Son of Theophilus* and *St. Peter Enthroned*, painted by Masaccio between 1425 and 1427 in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence; the panel *The Just Judges* of the magnificent Ghent Altar, completed by Jan Van Eyck in 1432; or the self-portrait painted by Rogier Van der Weyden between 1435 and 1450 in *The Justice of Trajan and Herkinbald*, and referred to by Nicolau de Cusa in *The Vision of God* as a display of a singular omnivision effect. These three works contain what it is believed to be the first artist self-portraits while clear statements of self-awareness and liberality. Following this process is also the alleged self-portrait on display at the

¹ The *Editio Princeps* of *De Pictura*, was published in Basel in 1540. The Italian version was printed in Venice in 1547. However, from 1435 onwards, numerous handwritten versions of the treatise, both in the Latin and the vernacular versions, began to circulate.

National Gallery and painted by Van Eyck in 1433 (fig. 01). At the top of the frame the artist inscribed as philosophical set of ideas: *Johannes de Eyck me fecit*; at the bottom, *Als Ich Can*, i.e., *quo potest* in literally translated as 'as I can'. The painting, depicting the living image of the painter, thus resembles "as it can" the image of his high craftsman. The painting, thus

formulated, truly configures, according to Gianlucca Cuozzo, a mirror capable of reflecting the artist's alter ego: "anyone who looks at the portrait should know that it's an image of me that, no matter how faithful, is neither true nor perfect, capable, that is, of being carried out with an even greater precision up to infinity" (Cuozzo, 2018: 127).



Fig. 01. Eyck, Jan van. (1433). *Portrait of a Man (Self-Portrait?)*. [online image]. Oil on oak. National Gallery, London. obtained from: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-portrait-of-a-man-self-portrait>.

For Belting, the new pictorial typology developed in Flanders from the third decade of Quattrocento should be understood in the context of a social conflict that opposed the nobility to the new and emerging social realities. At the heart of this distant revolution lies, in fact, the origin of the contemporary Selfie, manifesting itself as an innovative aesthetic product, i.e., the true and mimetic representation of the individual as grantor of memory and social status. This new typology of representation will be responsible for the advent of a previously unpublished theme: the bourgeois portrait taken under a renewed design, that is, as a magic mirror of the human being in opposition to the idealized portrait of the nobility with purely aulic and / or symbolic purposes (Belting, 2014: 29; Smith, 2004: 47). The contemporary subject, in portraying himself, conveys precisely an image value pointing out to this process. The new, but also the old social portrait is thus characterized by two essential and, in a sense, paradoxical qualities: individuality and / or uniqueness; and wholeness or completeness. If on the one hand the portrait has as its primary function to reveal what distinguishes the portrayed from the others, or even from itself if it was portrayed in a different period or under different circumstances, on the other hand it seeks to reveal what the portrayed has in common with the rest of humanity and what remains constant in it, regardless of place and time (Panofsky, 1971: 194). This process remains, from the perspective of Byung-Chul Han, inscribed in contemporary rituals of the search for otherness: "Today, everyone wants to be different from everyone else. But in this desire on the part of each to be different, the identical remains" (Han, 2018: 30). Hence, the self-portrait of once and the contemporary Selfie demand the integration and contextualization of the individual in society – its ultimate purpose is the *like*.

Like the contemporary selfie, the *Quattrocento* artist also represents himself integrated in the socio-imaginary universe that he inhabits. Primordial traits of similar significance with the Selfie are there in the

Flemish pictorial representations, where reflections of the painter are concealed on the mirrored surfaces. A faithfully represented mirror, armor, or helmet are not singularly constituted as such, but reified by returning the reflection of the world inhabited by the artist. Examples of this unique mechanism of indirect self-representation are clearly contained in numerous works by Jan van Eyck: see the specific case of the painter's reflections on St. George's armour in *The Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele*, painted between 1434 and 1436; or in the famous *Arnolfini Portrait* (fig. 02), where the reflection in the mirror in the background clearly illustrates the complexity of the self-representation mechanisms used by the artist. Accurate and relatively recent studies on the optical phenomena contained in both works by Jan Van Eyck and Robert Campin lead us, according to the authors, António Criminisi, Martin Kemp and Sing Bing Kang, to draw a set of conclusions whose impact certainly implies a broad and profound theoretical reflection around the usual conceptual assumptions of art history. Stemming from an accurate multidisciplinary examination of Robert Campin's *Saint John and Donor* (fig. 03) and *Arnolfini Portrait*, the authors establish a complex geometric, mathematical and computational analysis of the reflexes contained in the two convex mirrors represented in both works and the conclusions we draw are surprising:

Whereas it may be possible to envisage an imaginary view in a spherical mirror, it is inconceivable that such consistently accurate optical effects could have been achieved by a simple act of the imagination. We are drawn to what seems to be the inescapable conclusion that the artist has directly observed and recorded the effects visible when actual figures and objects are located in a specific interior. Such a result means that, at some point, models must have been posed in exactly those positions occupied in the painting (...)" (Criminisi, Kemp e Kang, 2004: 117-118).



Fig. 02. Eyck, Jan van. (1434). *Portrait of Giovanni(?) Arnolfini and his Wife*. [online image]. Oil on oak. National Gallery, London. obtained from: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait#VideoPlayer95520>.



Fig. 03. Campin, Robert. (1438). *Saint John the Baptist and the Franciscan Heinrich von Werl*. [online image]. Oil on oak. Museo del Prado, Madrid. obtained from: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/saint-john-the-baptist-and-the-franciscan/28b9fdc8-467b-4528-8eba-de91581ccad5>.

This set of conclusions is a truly unexpected reality, showing at a glance that Selfie's self-representative impulse, taken as the subject's authorial reflection was there more even before that we often thought. These surfaces thus assume the typological value of the 'magic mirror' and support their self-representation. Through this mechanism, the artist demands recognition by the "other", formalized through the restricted presential and social media he joins. Its impact, however, becomes overwhelming as it emanates from the centre of alic power. The artist serves the pamphlet purposes of the patrons, and by visually integrating himself with these mechanisms of statutory authority, he assumes an equivalent status. Their integration, parasitic and timid, is almost always done in the deep spheres. The challenge of direct gaze thus contrasts with the discreet positioning in the religious and social hierarchies represented. The epitome of this self-affirmation process is shown in the self-portrait of Alte Pinakothek of Munich, which Albrecht Dürer painted in 1500 (fig. 04). Dürer, because he can, wakes up in this glorious year of 1500 metamorphosed *in imaginem* of God. His self-representation manifests itself simultaneously in three complementary spheres: the narcissistic operative, witnessed in the entered formula²; the theological through the representation of the symbolic mirror of God; the philosophical by introducing the doctrine of the "absolute gaze" of Nicholas of Cusa. Through these three mechanisms, Dürer assumes, in Belting's view, an opposite position to that of the young Narcissus, that is, not an entanglement in self-love, therefore narcissistic-depressive, but an act of superior complexity: "The portrait has thus an excess of reference, because it is not limited only to the man of flesh and blood portrayed here, but reveals in it an absolute beauty that transcends him. The divine resemblance thus stands out in the full resemblance of the portrait with the face of Dürer" (Belting, 2011: 125). Representing the outside world thus asserts itself as the ultimate affirmation of power.

Self-representation is instituted as the ultimate 'luxury' – the only procedural demand capable of overcoming both social exiguity and amnesia. Through the written formula applied to painting, Dürer confirms precisely the "notarial" nature of his work. At twenty-eight he paints himself with colour because he can: the affirmation of his power is clear; clear enjoyment of his status. The image thus produced does not reflect the tiny uniqueness of the Selfie, but rather a plural visual sense of multiple meanings. The "self" in Dürer takes on the nature of multiple Selves of wide significance – the selfie morphs into *Selvie*.

Indeed, Like Narcissus, Dürer also lurks behind a singular act. His depiction, however, is the sublime³. For this reason, it doesn't fall into the category which Belting calls 'image abuse'. Its representation, far from the banality and grotesque, fully assumes the Icon's formula: "The resemblance between icon and portrait, a metaphysical resemblance, leads to the sense of Dürer's self-portrait. In this unusual portrait, face and mask, God's own face and mask are printed and impressed with each other, to use photographic terminology" (Belting, 2011: 126). His reflection thus constitutes an act of theological disobedience while simultaneously conferring on his face the beauty and nature of the sacred icon. Through this act the painter seems to evoke the transcendence of the magic mirror thus bringing back the classic concept of *Kalokagathia*, that is, of the Greek concept of the good and the beautiful and the inextricable connection of these two concepts. His statement seeks not only the harmonization between beauty and supreme goodness but fundamentally the usurpation of categories usually regarded as the privilege of the ruling classes: social and intellectual virtue. From this perspective, artistic self-portrait is thus the first act of social disobedience in the image history of humanity. The contemporary Selfie – the trivialization of this achievement.

2 *Albertus Durerus Noricus ipsum me propriis sic effingebam coloribus ætatis anno XXVIII*: Albert Dürer of Nuremberg, I so depicted myself with colours, at the age of 28.

3 The conceptual anti-climax of Dürer's transcendent portrait will come with the process characterized by Max Weber as "Disenchantment of the World" (*Entzauberung*). This will manifest itself through progressive rationalization and intellectualization, by the elimination of magical and animistic beliefs, as well as mysticism, metaphysics and by an exacerbated alienation of the individual. The spiritual world will become progressively empty and sterile. This alienation will give rise to a growing pessimism with evident reflexes in the processes of self-representation. This phenomenon is inscribed both in the moralizing and self-punishing character of Caravaggio's self-portraits (1571-1610); as in the disenchantment and socioeconomic decay of Rembrandt's self-portraits (1606-1669); as well as, in the plea for silence that Salvator Rosa's self-portrait shows (1615-1675) (Houser, 1965: 89-90; Weber, 2015: 33-34).



Fig. 04. Dürer, Albrecht. (1500). *Self-Portrait at Twenty-Eight*. [online image]. Oil on oak. Alte Pinakothek, Munich. obtained from: <https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/qlx2QpQ4Xq/albrecht-duerer/selbstbildnis-im-pelzrock>.

SELF-PORTRAIT IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION – THE “AGE OF DEMOCRATIZATION”

One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced (Benjamin, 1992: 79)

Democratization of photography has definitively alienated the subject from the epistemic ‘action’ of self-portrayal. In the Photographic Herald and Amateur

Sportsman of November 1889, Kodak announced precisely the end of this ontological milestone: “*You press the button, we do the rest*”. The advent of mass pho-

tography thus characterizes two striking events in the imaginary universe: the end of artistic exclusivity in self-representation; and the full institution of the image as absolute truth. Photography, unlike painting, seemed to show reality as it was, without artifice, manipulation or idealization. As a record of reality, it seemed immune to any and all external influences that had hitherto obscured the truthfulness of art. This mutation in the nominal value of image in the transformation of twentieth-century European societies is clearly defined in Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes*. Indeed, for Hobsbawm the massification of photography during the twentieth century would assume an absolute documentary nature in light of the "illusory belief that the camera doesn't lie" thus manifesting itself as a reflection of apparent authenticity: "men and women have learned to see reality through camera lenses" (Hobsbawm, 2011: 194).

A clear example of the transition between the pictorial image, manipulative and transcendent in its inventive nature, and the uncompromisingly 'real' photographic image, is present in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1752 comedy *Narcissus*, or the lover of himself. The fact that it was written about two hundred and fifty years after Dürer's self-portrait but a century before the advent of photography, becomes extremely relevant because it gives this transition a clear ontological value. In the original comedy, Valère's pictorial portrait is manipulated to make him look like a woman. As a result, and because he doesn't recognize himself in the metamorphosed image, Valère falls in love with himself. Faced with this bizarre thing, Angelique questions the legitimacy of self-love and the need for approval as a mechanism for social integration: "*After all, what do you find so ridiculous in him? Since he is lovable, is he so wrong to love himself, and do we not set the example for him? He aims to please. Ah! If that is a fault, what more charming virtue could a man offer to society?*". The timeliness of a text written in the mid-eighteenth century is underlined by Simon Critchley, who questions precisely the typological value of the image as conferring distinction and inequality, marks that characterize precisely the contemporary Selfie: "*It is with this desire for distinction that the healthy 'amour of soi' or 'self-love' that defines human beings in a natural state begins to be transformed into a narcissistic amour propre or pride. For Rousseau, the origin of narcissism consists of this desire for social distinction, from a sense of one's own importance. Thus, inequality and narcissism derive from the same source*" (Critchley, 2015: 6, 62-63). This particularly narcissistic and affected universe denoted by Rousseau is also reflected in contemporary

imagery. A satirical print from the British Museum dating back to 1782 seems to illustrate precisely the banality of self-contemplation as a mechanism of social isolation that Rousseau's comedy translates. An impeccably uniformed young officer watches his own reflection on the mirrored surface of a lake, thus causing the despair of a totally ignored young woman aspiring the role of wife (fig. 05). Like the lake that Valère contemplates, the contemporary subject also demands its reflection on the mirrored surfaces of the digital. The mobile phone is thus established as a portable mirror surface – a space where Narcissus never drowns before, it seems to emerge metamorphosed and renewed at every moment⁴. Byung-Chul Han denounces precisely the centrality that the immanence of the reflection constitutes in today's imaginary culture. The concept of smooth, polished, and the absolute absence of creases are, in his opinion, intrinsic symbols of the contemporary beauty (Han, 2016).

Like the young Narcissus, the coeval subject delights only through the contemplation of his reflection. However, his presence is no longer restricted to the background but imposes itself before the reality that surrounds it. Its framing, being also parasitic like Flemish painters, now asserts itself in the foreground. His attitude is one of defiance, feeling, narcissistic and of permanent self-love. The contemporary subject is thus unable to understand self-representation as a primordial 'luxury'. His production is that of the banal and repetitive gesture. The image he produces, as it depicts an immediate present, transitory and ephemeral, is never constituted as a point of ontological reflection. For Byung-Chul Han, this phenomenon translates into the establishment of what he calls a "feeling of emptiness": "The addition to selfies does not have much to do with a healthy love of oneself: it is nothing more than walking in a void of a narcissistic self that was left alone. Before the inner emptiness, the subject tries in vain to produce himself" (Han, 2018: 35). This instituted self-representation manifests an absolute absence of references – he will never possess the inheritance of Dürer's icon. His face has the quality of the mask. The authenticity and transcendence of pictorial self-portrait has given way to the banality, grotesqueness, and worthlessness of the Selfie.

Thus, the photographic image assumes new competences diametrically opposed to the seminal soteriological functions that are usually kinked to its inception and development. This process promotes, in Belting's view, a clear shift between the "thing" and

4 Despite being a self-preserving device, it is certain that the portability of mobile phones and the insane pursuit of the original selfie lead to countless accidental deaths every year. The resulting tragedy contains within itself the original pathos of Narcissus's death.



Fig. 05. Bowles, Carington. 1782. *Narcissus and the Nymph Echo*. [online image]. Mezzotint hand-coloured. The British Museum. Registration number: 1935,0522.1.83. obtained from: <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/148334001>.

its image: "Images are today consumed as information, thus sparing the general public the fatigue of reading. It's information with the unspoken invitation to idolatry" (Belting, 2011: 24). Image, taken here as a simplifier of speech, thus promotes the dysfunction of thought. However, since the beginning of its massive production and dissemination, image has not always assumed the same purpose and function and is still free from the exclusive sphere of the individual. In fact, until the dawn of the nineteenth century, it was almost always associated with an individual salvific discourse, whose contours took on a doctrinal and/or moralizing appearance and after this clearly became a distinguishing means between these two belligerent social groups. However, this nominal value of image, taken as a mirror/reflection of the emerging societies of the twentieth century now has a clear solipsistic dimension. The "truth" once bestowed upon the image intensifies the infirmity of thought. While previously

it granted social or group awareness, today image is trapped in the narrow psychic "bubble" of its producer. The producer thus assumes, at the same time, the role of consumer and enhancer of his own image, a value that he later confirms through the adhesion or refutation of his digital peers.

This autophagic dimension of the image now takes on contours of absolute novelty. While on the one hand there has never been such a marked independence in both production and visual awareness of ourselves, on the other, the individual image has never before assumed such a despicable and prosaic value. This phenomenon resulted in what Han calls the narcissistic-depressive subject. The reverberation of his world happens to the extent that it constantly revises itself in its reflection – a kind of *mise en abyme* where the subject, like Valère, "drowns" passionately in his own image: "Depression is primarily a narcissistic

affliction. It's an excessive and pathologically inverted relationship of the individual with himself (...)" (Han, 2016: 75). This self-awareness clearly formalizes the traits of a society ruled by a singular paradox, i.e., a society that despairs in the pursuit of a singular individualism by diluting the "I" into an absurd collectivism. Thus, individualism nowadays takes on contours of curious historical dissociation, i.e., constantly promoting the search for personal and identity imagery through selective imitation of peers. This mechanism may be the reason behind the establishment of an original imaginary phenomenon: if from the perspective of the sender there is the illusory sensation of achieving a resounding originality; From the point of view of the recipient, however, this has almost always contours of obvious banality. The receiver tends to banalise, integrate and normalize the external image in contrast with its illusory originality, thus imposing a clear ambiguity on identity processes. The visual thinking of the "other – integrated, reformulated and consecrated in the operative mechanics of the "I" – almost always translates into illusory and original novelty.

In this post-digital age, we are thus confronted for the first time in the history of mankind with challenges of urgency, that is, the need to recover and defend at all costs the space established between peripheral and individual and between one individual and the others. Within the space of a decade or so, the traditional generational barriers were removed and replaced by shapeless and artificial age horizontality, translated into a diffuse and depersonalized mass. Depersonalization is now an imperative condition for a broad sociocultural reach, that is, the more the depersonalization of an ideal is emphasized, the larger and more totalitarian it becomes. Thus, social media themselves constitute a diffuse and illusory leveller of many hete-

rogeneities, confusing and masking some modern sociocultural markers: cultural reality – economic reality – social reality. Through the manipulated self-portrait and the emulation of character, mannerisms and postures alien to the subject's own internal reality one thus seeks to achieve a notorious sociocultural amalgam.

Notwithstanding the falsehood of the identity traits thus established, its illusory penchant almost always leads to a perpetuation of the model: on the one hand given the fear of the emptiness that "being" itself is faced with, now deprived of its identity chains and equally levelled; on the other, given the very desire for modular perpetuity that social media induce and establish. This mechanism promotes what Belting calls 'image abuse', i.e., an inductive process that makes it impossible to ultimately ascertain its truthfulness: "*It's impossible for us to see both its production and the falsehood carried out in and with them (...)* We would have lost all control over them if we loose the ability to tell between proof and falsification" (Belting, 2011: 35). Self-image, taken here as selfie but at the same time assuming the traditional value of self-portrait, thus assumes itself as the absolute icon of this age. Selfie and the processes of self-representation thus become the apogee of what Günther Anders referred to in 1956 as 'icon mania', which Belting defines as a mechanism of evasion of oneness: "*We try to abolish the limits where our life unfolds. The simultaneous consumption of the same images offer the sensation of living in a world without social and cultural barriers – which is undoubtedly a self-delusion*" (Belting, 2011: 23). The subject thus seeks to achieve the ultimate metamorphosis of his daily reality through the manipulation operated in his self-image.

FROM THE "AGE OF CATASTROPHE" TO THE "AGE OF BANALIZATION"

When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from a restless dream he saw that he had become a monstrous insect in his sleep (Kafka, 2007: 9).

The image overlaps sign and word simply because the latter formulates both a convention and demand, in Belting's view, a clear compromise as regards its deciphering: "We do not believe as much in signs as in images, but we have to decipher and interpret them (Belting, 2011: 10). The traditional vehicles of cognitive distinction, resting to a great extent on the produc-

tion and dissemination of original thought, have thus given way to forms of language sustained almost exclusively on image. The complexity of the written code, used mostly in pre-digital mass media has been turned into visual phonemes of singular simplicity. These thus approach a seminal linguistic matrix focused exclusively on the set of references and stripped of some of

the most sophisticated foundations of language: the case of signs; of analogy; of allegory; of metonymy; of metaphor; of symbolism; and meaning. This seemingly ambiguous setback becomes even more problematic when confronted with the obvious inseparability between thought and language as defined by Max Müller: "(...) *Language and thought are inseparable, and (...) a disease of language is therefore the same as a disease of thought*" (Müller *apud* Cassirer, 1992: 109). Thus, verbal language tends to assume an increasingly onomatopoeic and liminal character, assisting the decoding system usually associated with nonverbal language – "*Language and culture become superficial and vulgar*" (Han, 2016: 29).

However, and unlike the present subject, the pre-digital age would be described exclusively through linguistic and verbal resources. The transfer or communication on their state of mind or identity would occur mainly through epistolary models, never imagery. This practice assumes a reflection, a plunge into the identity of being – ultimately – the realization of a psychological self-portrait. The contemporary subject doesn't make take the plunge, but rather dwells on the surface through the superficial self-portrait. This superficial image – of immediate understanding – seeks the superficial acceptance of identity pairs. This mechanism results in one of the perverse effects that the selfie of social networks promotes, i.e., conversion of the "other" into a mere peripheral and visual and identity reverberation of the producing subject. This metamorphosis mechanism thus translates into a system of mutual recognition, of specular and encomiastic nature. I recognize and approve the "other" in proportion to the recognition and approval that this "other" gives me. This acceptance mechanism is thus behind the exponential increase of social media users – its growth will be unstoppable as will the need for integration and approval that the subject places on his peers. He is desperately eager to be seen and to be liked. Contemporary society is thus delighted in the exact measure of a single word composed of four letters only – like. The despair that "like me" translates rests equally in the secret desire of wanting the "other" to be precisely like me. The generalized volition of approval thus lead to the generalization of homogeneity. The desire

for metamorphosis into what the "other" represents was never that desired as then.

However, this desire for metamorphosis and alterity today takes on a totally opposite proportion to that experienced in the first half of the 20th century – the era of catastrophe (Hobsbawm, 2011: 190-191). Despite the massive advent of photography and the democratization of self-image – this era will be shaken by a strong sense of incomprehensibility of the human condition. The feeling of exclusion or of not belonging to the collective, was superimposed on all the mechanisms of individuation, whether literary or imagetic. This fear of the individual's metamorphosis into a collective and anonymous being, has now given way to a deep desire for belonging and social dilution.

A contemporary Gregor Samsa would not wake up to the nightmare of functional depersonalization that his metamorphosis into a gigantic insect represents, but rather to the identity and visual urgency towards his peers. A Kafkian social universe in everything similar to that characterized in *Metamorphosis* that would wake up having the same nightmare: However, thanks to the imaginary dilution of the subject in the "other", he would not realize this. Kafka finds in the metaphor of man's metamorphosis into an insect the symbol of his extreme dehumanization, i.e., an inverted being diametrically opposed to the morphological norm of the human being: skeleton on the outside and viscerally diluted on the inside. Like this representation, the coetaneous subject is also inverted in its ontological sense, that is, it shows a full external imaginary significance but is however diluted and empty inside⁵. Thus, and in light of the imagery and depersonalizing whirlwind that social media promote, one might wonder whether all Gregor Samsas have been eradicated in this post-digital age. We don't believe it, but there are substantial differences that mitigate his condition. Indeed, today all the Gregor Samsa's of the world communicate with each other; all share their identity void before falling asleep; and all without exception reverberate the reflection of the emptiness of their existential statement the morning after.

Along with this reality, the contemporary world shows another curious and innovative narrative overlap stem-

⁵ The monstrous being that Kafka imagines, diluted inside, rigid outside, is a symbol of extreme dehumanization, an ontological inversion of being. The contemporary desire for self-representation also follows a similar model. The selfie reproduces only a rigid and narcissistic version of the exterior, but a total dilution of the portrait's identity and ontology. This illusion clearly does not satisfy the subject's desire for identity, but rather reproduces Gregor's original emptiness.

ming from the tragic tradition of the children's tales. The Kafkian myth of the decay and abandonment of 'Being', diluted in the post-industrial effluvia, is thus overlapped with the myth of the magical mirror of the German tale *Schneewittchen* known through the Grimm brother's version as *Snow White*. The specular reflection plays in this tale the role of palliative, still enclosed in the long classical tradition of *Kalokagatia*. Remember that for the Greeks, good existed only in the concentricity of the beautiful, pushing ugliness and evil away into periphery – as this were interrelated and interdependent concepts. The reflection on the mirror; genuine ontological peripheral, thus translates into an immediate and imperative redemption, he only assurance of the survival of the evil character of the story. The Selfie as confirmation/approval of the 'other' is a perfect metaphor for the magical mirror of the *Schneewittchen* tale. The image it produces, according to current standards of beauty, almost always represents a being asleep being to his inner reality.

Let us now imagine for a moment that Gregor Samsa had in his circumscribed habitat the benevolent agreement of the magic mirror. Endowed with this peripheral oracle, Samsa would seek salvation through social dilution and the approval of his peers, precisely what social media promise – agreement and horizontality in the meaning of life. The Computer, provided with a "social" network, thus becomes a magical mirror and the ultimate palliative for the hardship of the emptiness that the contemporary "being" is faced with. Each user is himself the "Being" who inhabits the mirror, qualifying and attributing the ultimate meaning of the action, the word, the choice, the destiny of the "Other" through a simple like. We need however to reflect on the nature of the matter, i.e., whether the personification of evil that the Grimm brothers inscribe would lead to salvation by repeating the famous mantra: *My mirror, my mirror, is there anyone more beautiful than Me?* In the original tale the mirror is deprived of the faculty of lying, but we envision here the process through which lie is formulated as a survival mechanism. The lie always represents an escape from reality, from inexorable peer censorship, and inevitably from punishment. Therefore, what lie institutes is rather an alternative universe where the being attains, through ignorance, the benevolence of forgiveness. The mirror doesn't lie, not because it's intrinsically good, but because no survival imperative arises for it. The survival of the oracle should thus depend on the content of answers, and the metaphorical mirror, through a process

of self-preservation, would immediately begin to lie, that is, to create benevolent and alternative universes for its sphere of comfort. And what mantra would Gregor Samsa achieve for his own identity salvation? It would be through a qualifying formula – *Tell me my mirror, is there anyone emptier than Me?* Or through a quantifying formula – *Tell me my mirror, is there anyone as empty as me?* One way or another, the result is always a reinforcement of Samsa's identity buttress; yes, it's true that the emptiness remains, but now this emptiness is the norm, being quantified, qualified, promoted and distributed by others.

The Samsa's of today have generated a new identity centre through the existential parity promoted by communication. Unlike the original oracle, these new social "mirrors" lie, and do so consciously. Alternative universes must be instituted so that their very existence is preserved and grounded, hence the importance of validating the reflection of the 'other' as a mechanism of self-preservation, that is, as the grounding of the 'Being' itself. Just look at a group of people who have no apparent relationship with each other every day to realize that the mirror no longer prefigures a static and immovable object but is present in all social interactions. Its portability has been ensured with the aim of perpetuating this identity fulfilment when the "Being" is threatened with more weaknesses, that is, in direct contact with the "Other". Thus, the contemporary subject, provided with his new "social" peripheral, shuns the judgment that the physical gaze of the "other" always implies, through the comfort of the identity convergence with the virtual "other". This reality confirms what Kafka calls '*ghost communication*', that is, remote communication as an impediment to the absolute understanding of the 'other': "(...) *How did we come to the idea that people can get along with each other through letters? (...) Written kisses don't reach their destination, they are drunk by ghosts along the way*" (Kafka, 2018: 214; Han, 2019: 105).

It's worth mentioning however that in the original *Metamorphosis* this mechanism of confrontational communication is fully absent. This absence is an extremely relevant aspect as it establishes an obligatory chronological counterpoint to the present. Indeed, and unlike the post-digital subject, Gregor Samsa is not confronted at all with his own reflection. It doesn't allow him to the limit of his strengths to be seen as intending to maintain the integrity of his privacy. The *Metamorphosis* introduces us to a Gregor Samsa lying

on his back on the bed and trying hard to understand what's wrong with him. From this point of view, we are before a subject still trying to understand and to find the roost of his existence, thus opposing to the current subject who only demands approval and recognition in the face of the "reflection" he sends. Gregor's first impulse is to institute an internal anamnesis in order to feel and understand what is going on with his body. He never searches his reflection and his perception is exclusively sensitive and non-visual. Gregor "feels" the bulging and useless dimension of his new body, which he can see little or nothing at all. Moreover, Kafka's description of the room is brief in this respect – there is no mirror. Incidentally, apparently no mirror is present in the Samsa family home. The Samsa family still seems to dwell in a pre-image world. In Gregor's room there is only a single visual reference – a photograph of a lady in a small hat clipped from a newspaper. This small glimpse of the social world, outside and diametrically opposed to the one in which Gregor inhabits, seems to constitute a reference window from another universe, distant and unreachable. Moreover, all descriptions and confrontations with reality will be literary and dependent on direct or indirect observers. Confirmation of his monstrosity is given to him exclusively through the eyes of others, his family, thereby confronting him with a reality that Gregor does not visually reach in its entirety. The Kafkian world constitutes itself as a presential world by nature, and communication takes on a dimension diametrically opposed to the phantasmatic communication. Gregor's self-portrait thus does not depend on any external and visual peripherals, but on a perception of his Self, of the archetype of himself.

Remember, however, that with the advent of photography, the individual will have been limited to the smallness of his reality. Perhaps for this reason Gregor Samsa is stripped of any mechanism of imagery self-representation. The intrinsic veracity of photography, like the "magic mirror" that doesn't lie, is not compatible with the sensitive-depressive world that the subject of the twentieth century now inhabits. It is no coincidence that Kafka gave detailed instructions to his editor in order for the cover would not visually illustrate Gregor's metamorphosis. He feels like an insect but, however, nowhere in the narrative does he see himself

as an insect. In 1916 edition of *Die Verwandlung*, the cover made by Ottomar Starke features a tormented man who hides his face with his hands (fig. 06). This specific action, that of covering the vision, brings the reader to an entirely psychological and sensitive world, given that much of the action takes place precisely inside Gregor's consciousness. From the literary point of view, it's a skilful work of imaginary and descriptive occlusion, but there are numerous contemporary pictorial examples whose similarity to the Kafkian psychological self-portrait is clearly there. In fact, and given that the advent of photography had long dispensed with the necessary pictorial realism, the pictorial self-portrait thus became also a mirror of the artist's archetypal and psychological reality. In the same year that Kafka wrote *Metamorphosis*, several painters looked at each other under the same visceral and distorted angle, establishing self-portraits in everything equivalent to metamorphosis. The conceptual formula of self-representation as the supreme 'luxury' and engine vehicle of statutory affirmation was definitively ignored. Henceforth, self-representation would imply confrontation, and this confrontation translated almost always into rejection. Europe, torn by social and political tensions and under the emerging threat of the Great War, produced monsters, and these dictated the imagery codes in vogue then. If we look at the self-portrait Ludwig Meidner painted in 1912, *Der Selbstmörder*⁶, the suicidal, we find precisely the same phantos of the metamorphosis of man torn by an oppressive reality. His body is dry, distorted and manipulated. The gaze diverges to a disturbing infinite. Like Meidner, Egon Schiele would also self-represent abundantly in the same way. Both his *Self Portrait with Raised Bare Shoulder*⁷ and his *Self Portrait with Lowered Head*⁸, painted in 1912, have the same psychological drive. Kafka, Meidner and Schiele thus denote a common concern in focusing the sense of self-representation, not as a reflection of its external form, but as a sensitive mirror of a collapsing inner world (fig. 07). This reality results from the early decline of Narcissus. In fact, after the strictly visual plunge into the authorial and statutory self-love of previous centuries the twentieth century brought about the sensitive and disturbed discomfort of the contemporary subject's consciousness. When confronted with the mirror that the gaze of the "other" represents, the reflection he sees almost always translates into a distortion of his intrinsic reality.

6 <https://www.barlach-haus.de/ausstellungen/unter-enerforschlichen-meteoriten-ludwig-meidner-ernst-barlach/>

7 <https://www.leopoldmuseum.org/en/collection/egon-schiele>

8 <https://www.leopoldmuseum.org/en/collection/highlights/131>



Fig. 06. Starke, Ottomar. (1916). *Die Verwandlung*. [online image]. Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag. obtained from: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/222576406554255490/>



Fig. 07. Schiele, Egon. (1911). *Self-Portrait*. [online image]. Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. obtained from: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/483438>

Indeed, the sensitive perception of oneself and the outside world will be constantly challenged by Gregor Samsa through direct confrontation with others and the world. At one point he wonders, *"Have I become less sensitive?"* (Kafka, 2007: 46). The visual and direct return of this world will also be gradually put to the test. Gregor will see less and less. At one point, the only perception he has will be that of a universe stricken with his own sensations, *"for it was now becoming more myopic"* (Kafka, 2007: 54). Also, the world of communication will be truncated, presenting new and strange challenges. Initially, Gregor clearly understands what he is told, but when he speaks, the voice that comes out of his body betrays the primary function of transmission of his ideas: *"– Do you understand a single word of what he said? – The manager asked his parents. 'He's he perhaps wanting to make a fool of us?' (...) – It was an animal voice (...)"* (Kafka, 2007: 26). At the end of the narrative, communication ceased completely. Gregor already dwelled in absolute muteness, filled only by the noise of his mind. *"If only he could understand us – said his father, in a somewhat inquiring tone"* (Kafka, 2007: 96-97). It will be in this desolate universe, without any glimpse of visual or hearing communication, isolated and immobile in the midst of oppressive darkness, that Gregor Samsa will die to the great relief of his family. Gregor himself becomes a ghost – far, therefore, from face-to-face communication, thus far from the physical reality of the Kafkaian "kiss".

Let us return, however, once again to the issue proposed above, that is, to imagine that Gregor Samsa wakes up today from his restless dream. The world that welcomes him, diametrically opposed to what Franz Kafka envisioned in 1912, will present you with new challenges but also new opportunities. Samsa inhabits a world where his reflection is abundant. His self-image, profusely present at every moment of his life, completely fills his universe. In his mobile phone inhabits a whole visual universe of infinite possibilities (fig. 08). Gregor wakes up from his restless dream and feels like a monstrous insect. His first impulse is to visit his social media in the secret urge to find someone else in his condition. Everyone he sees is in fact in the same situation. He quickly sends his self-portrait with the hashtag: #wokeupliethis – not without first making a slightly affected pose. A moment later, he hears his sister in the next room laughing abundantly. He only infers her pleasure when she confirms her acceptance through a like. Few moments after shower of likes flood the visual and sonic space of his morning. Gregor felt integrated and appeased in his Metamorphosis as the entire network responded to him reactively. In an instant, his entire visual universe was transformed into an insect, and the insect that is, annulled in its uniqueness. The contemporary Gregor Samsa soothes through his selfie and his self-representation his inner emptiness. He no longer dies in the absurd loneliness of the room, but his condition is visually democratized. Metamorphosis into the "other" became his life quest. Its disclosure, the immanent sign of Narcissus.

Fig. 08. Rocha, Kaique. [2019]. *Person Taking a Photo Using Iphone*. [online image]. obtained from: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/phone-iphone-taking-photo-selfie-36675/>



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