Original Article

Selfie and Interpellation - A Preliminary Study of the Role of Ideology in the Social Construction of Reality, Self and Society in the Digital Age

Matteo Stocchetti

Department of Culture and Communication, Arcada University of Applied Sciences, FINLAND

Abstract: In this essay, I present a preliminary analysis of selfying that combines the social construction of the self with the critical approach to scientific knowledge. Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' and the works of Goffman and Barthes offer useful conceptual tools for a radical engagement with the social significance of selfying. This preliminary analysis mainly concludes that selfying is a distinctive and ambivalent form of 'interpellation from below', addressing but also reproducing the challenges pertaining to the construction of the self in the symbolic universe of the neoliberal agenda. On semantic grounds, the most significant aspect of this process is that the 'signifier' creates its 'signified', and the social construction of the self is framed within the confines of capitalist ideology and its symbolic forms of expression of the relationship between reality, the individual and society. The relevance of this approach is at least twofold. On theoretical grounds, I am trying to combine Kenneth J. Gergen's approach to the social construction of the self and Jürgen Habermas critique of the ideology of science with Barthes' insights on the problems of meaning, Goffman's understandings of the 'problems of the real', and Althusser's notion of interpellation. On practical grounds, the ambition is to increase awareness and knowledge of the dilemmas associated with the presentation of the self in the digital age, and to inspire more emancipative responses to these dilemmas: responses more independent of and possibly challenging the ideological project of neoliberalism.

Keywords: Social constructionism, selfying, interpellation, neoliberalism, digital self

Introduction: the ideological construction of the self and the politics of knowledge

This paper addresses and connects two main issues: the practices of selfying and the possibility of studying this practice from a perspective that combines relations of meaning with relations of power. The underlying ambition of this provisional effort is to contribute to the development of a critical theory of the self in the digital age. On theoretical or conceptual grounds, the main points of reference are Social Constructionism and, in particular, the idea of the self as a social construction, most explicitly expounded by Kenneth J. Gergen, and Jürgen Habermas' critical theory of knowledge.

Address for Correspondence: Matteo Stocchetti, email: matteo.stocchetti@arcada.fi

For Gergen, Social Constructionism is a movement that collects ideological, literary and epistemological forms of criticism of the dominant orders (Gergen, 2011, p. 109) and is based on three sets of shared, core tenets concerning the social origins of knowledge, the centrality of language and the politics of knowledge (Gergen, 2011, pp. 109-110). Within the framework of Social Constructionism, the study of the social construction of the self focuses on three main aspects:

> "establishing the self as a social construction…..specific social processes in which the conception of the self is embedded and the …. critical assessment of the cultural and political outcomes of traditional beliefs in the self". (Gergen, 2011, p. 110)

This paper focuses on the second aspect and my main point is that the practice of selfying is a form of communication that implies and reproduces a notion of the self compatible with the neoliberal agenda of 'methodical destruction of collectives' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 2).

Furthermore, I look at the study of selfying from the perspectives of the politics of knowledge and at the ambivalences associated with the uses of visual images as the 'language' of selfying, to argue for the importance of the ideological dimension that most mainstream study of selfies seems to neglect. In my short discussion of Erving Goffman and Roland Barthes, I hope to convince the reader that the work of these authors contains very useful insights for a more critical engagement with selfying.

The need for a more critical engagement with this and other forms of presentation of the self in the digital age is invited by the third aspect inspiring the social constructionist tradition or "the critical assessment of the cultural and political outcomes of traditional beliefs in the self". The idea that reality is socially constructed does not imply that a better social world is inevitable but, quite the contrary, that it is indeterminate as the actualization of both utopian and dystopian futures depends entirely on the quality of social interactions. The nature and direction of social change depends on the configurations of the relationship between the individual and society. The acknowledgement that relationships ultimately create the social world and its future is only a first step to oppose the influence of ideologies, knowledges and powers that offer security in exchange for freedom: that 'liberate' people from the burden of responsibility for their world, in exchange for their compliance with deterministic representations of human nature, society and the future.

The interpretation of the self as socially constructed 'is itself a construction and not a truth posit' but one that makes it possible to subject all alternative conceptualizations of the self to 'critical reflection' (Gergen, 2011, p. 115). The need for this 'critical reflection', however, is important and justified because knowledge, and in our case the knowledge that contributes to the social conceptualization of the self, is always associated with relations of power. As Gergen put it:

> "…social constructionism is closely allied with a pragmatic conception of knowledge. That is, traditional issues of truth and objectivity are replaced by concerns with that which research brings forth. It is not whether an account is true from a God's eye view that matters, but rather, the implications for cultural life that follow from taking any truth claim seriously". (Gergen, 2011, p. 110)

In critical social theory, this 'pragmatic' view of knowledge is coupled with the other idea that alternative forms of knowledge are associated with competing ideologies of knowledge. In one of the most influential formulations of this idea, Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1971) suggests that the evolution of natural and social sciences depends on conditions associated with, rather than independent of, ideological assumptions. Being ideological, rather than epistemological or methodological, these assumptions are not revealed in the practices of scientific knowledge

but pertain to the purposes that inspire these practices, in essence of control and interpretation. The former inspires the epistemology of natural sciences that ultimately seek the control of the natural world. The latter is the approach of humanities that problematize human understanding and communication and is necessary for emancipation.

My analysis of selfying as an influential communicative practice associated with the influence of neoliberalism is a preliminary effort to combine a social constructionist notion of the self with critical social theory concerns about the competing purposes of control and emancipation. The contribution of the critical perspective and Habermas's formulation consists in pointing to hermeneutics and more broadly to the interpretation of meaning as the epistemological grounds for emancipation, the normative goal that social constructionism seeks through 'critical reflection'.

On hermeneutic grounds, a critical approach needs to question the practice and the knowledge-practice of mainstream studies of selfies because selfying and the study of selfies are influential in the social construction of the self. I will argue that a considerable amount of research published studies selfying in terms of pathologization, instrumentalization and ambivalence of the motives, effects and functions of selfies but, in the process of 'scientific' representation, they reinforce the idea of the individualized self. These studies neglect the ideological influence of systems of signification or, in semiotic terms, the interpretation of *selfying as a practice in which the signifier produces its signified* or, in the terms of Louis Althusser, *selfying as a form of interpellation from below*.

The analysis in most of these studies, in other words, miss the latent influence of digital/global capitalism on the social construction of the self, hindering more radical ideological criticism and the practical possibility to serve the emancipative purposes of a hermeneutic approach to selfying. To recover this dimension, my starting point or 'working hypothesis' is to consider selfying as a form of interpellation that, if questioned through the insights of Erving Goffman and Roland Barthes (or presumably other authors, for that matter), can provide valuable knowledge about the strengths and limits of 21st century capitalism in the social construction of the self.

The study of selfies

Much of the research published on selfying falls mostly into three categories: psychological sciences, marketing, and socio-cultural studies. A large share of research in the first category examines the association of selfying with narcissism. Publications in the second categories are for the most part inspired by the possibility of marketing exploitation of this practice. Research published in the third category engages more deeply with issues of meaning and ambivalent relations of control and emancipation.

In psychological sciences, the interest in understanding the personal motivations of selfying (Huang, 2018) (Sung, et al., 2016) (Kim & Chock, 2017) is coupled with a concern about the association of this practice with narcissism and the problem of understanding to what extent, if any, this practice should be considered as a 'sign' of narcissism: an effect, a cause or a mix of both. (Singh, et al., 2018) (Lee & Sung, 2016) (Halpern, et al., 2016) (McCain, et al., 2016) (Moon, et al., 2016) (Sorokowski, et al., 2015) (Weiser, 2015) (Kapidzic, 2013).

In dealing with the narcissistic implication of selfying, however, these studies do not problematize at least two fundamental aspects of narcissism. First, its association with capitalism and the incitation to the narcissistic presentation of the self that is inherent and consequential to consumerism. Second, by pointing to the association between selfying and narcissism but neglecting the established fact that pathological narcissism is fundamentally a defence mechanism resulting from an experience of deep insecurity, these studies do not

address the question of why this practice, and by extension the narcissistic drives associated to it, is so widespread and popular. Or, in other words, what is the source of the insecurities, apprehension or traumas for this and other signs of the alleged 'narcissistic epidemic' (Twenge & Campbell, 2009) that, among other things, make selfying so popular among people living in a society of digital capitalism.

In organization, management and marketing studies, selfies are accessible signs of online identities and, as such, an accessible resource in the consumeristic manipulation of individuals' behaviour. In these studies, the 'understanding of the selfie phenomenon' is often inspired by an explicit instrumental interest and the effort to 'generate useful solutions for capitalizing on the selfie phenomenon in ways that enhance marketing performance and contribute to accomplishing marketing-related goals' (Weng, 2016, p. 1784).

The analysis in these studies also shows that the culture of marketing, or what Wernick called the 'promotional cultural' of late capitalism (Wernick, 1991), is influential in the social construction of the self. On the one hand, people are willing to adopt the visual conventions of corporate communication, "presenting themselves as brands by formulating online profiles with images of lifestyle" (Rokka & Canniford, 2016, p. 1809). On the other hand, however, the opinion of others and the success of 'personal branding' is influential on the individual's self-esteem (Pounders, et al., 2016). In practice, these studies suggest that selfying is a sign of the influence of capitalism on the social construction of the self.

While in some cases the interpretation of selfies as 'objectified self-representation' is explicitly instrumental to the marketing interest of the industry (Lyu, 2016), more critical voices notice the shift in the social relevance of selfying from 'liberation' to 'control':

> "Much like plastic surgery, self-help programs and self-branding, selfies represent yet another medium for continually augmenting the self for presentation and evaluation by others and the self. And while postmodern perspectives celebrate the potential agency afforded by such trends, others see such trends as further reinforcing a socially engrained habitual state characterized by hyper- reflexivity in which one is continually looking over one's shoulder, ridden with angst and anxiety". (Kedzior & Allen, 2016, p. 1899)

If and when elements of ambivalence appear, for example in relation to the opposite conditions of emancipation and control, these are conceptually resolved by introducing the distinction between the 'individual' and 'societal' levels:

> "while on the individual level selfies can be perceived as forms of agentic expression and empowerment, they still can be subjected to different forms of societal control. The mechanism of such control is conceptualized here as a network of intersecting gazes governed by the logic of panopticon, synopticon and spectacle." (Kedzior, et al., 2016, p. 1770)

Embracing the idea that the self is nowadays socially constructed through the communicative affordances of digital communication, sociological and cultural approaches reject the tendency to the pathologization of selfying and are more inclined to see the elements of ambivalence associated with this practice (Senft & Baym, 2015, pp. 1589-1590). These studies interpret selfying as a communicative practice influential in the social construction of the self and seek to understand its relationship with control and emancipation (Poletti & Rak, 2014) (Cover, 2016).

Some studies in this tradition interpret selfying as a sign of individual compliance with the global construction of the corporate individual:

> "Individuals who publish self-portraits on social media networks such as Instagram (usually) do not have to fulfil commercial targets. Still, by taking part in such textual practices, they

> seem to adapt the homogenized multimodal language, thereby contributing to spreading values and interests of global corporations". (Veum & Moland Undrum, 2018, p. 100)

Others suggest that selfies are not used to develop or implement an idea of the self but to perform more complex social functions:

> "Rather than self-expression, self-portraits in SNSs have a new role: the generation of interaction with strangers in the Network Mode. Photos are anchors that enable and invite 'phatic communion' as defined by Malinowski, which 'serve to establish bonds of personal union between people' and establish sociability (Malinowski, 1966: 313–16). Photos are thus productive: not only do they produce value for both the user qua image entrepreneur and the site operators (cf. Hearn, 2008), they also produce sociability, social bonds, channels of gift exchange, and standards for social hierarchization and organization". (Schwarz, 2010, p. 180)

Contributions from this perspective also problematize selfying as a unitary or reified object of study, e.g. re-constructing it as a practice that includes conflict and mediation (Tiidenberg, 2015), or subverting mainstream conceptualizations of the relations between the body, the image and technology (Warfield, et al., 2016).

Elements for a critical hermeneutics of selfying: L. Althusser, E. Goffman and R. Barthes

Discussing selfying in terms of relations of power and meaning, rather than pathologization or instrumentalization, is more in line with the emancipative ambitions of critical constructionism. In line with this tradition, I suggest paying more attention to the role of ideology and, as anticipated earlier, to consider selfying as a form of interpellation that, if properly questioned, can provide valuable knowledge about the strengths and confines of 21st century capitalism in the social construction of the self. In this section, I will first briefly articulate this 'working hypothesis' and the heuristic value of 'interpellation' for our purposes and then discuss the contributions of Erving Goffman and Roland Barthes to the critical interpretation of selfying.

Althusser: interpellation

'Interpellation' is an influential, complex and contested concept. This complexity and contestation, however, partly reflects the problem of translating from one language (French) into another (English) subtleties that are closely associated with differences in the respective communicative cultures (Montag, 2017). French philosopher Louis Althusser introduced the concept of 'interpellation' in his discussion of ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 2008 (1971)) to describe the 'productive' or 'transformative' power of ideology. The analysis of this power is fundamental to understand the nature and confines of the role of ideology in the social construction of the self.

The notion of interpellation does not appear often in the analysis of selfies. One notable exception, however, is Rob Cover that in his study on the digital identity, make an important case for its analytical value in the study of selfies.

For Cover:

> "Selfies are interesting here as an example of a way in which the ubiquity of digital communication, media, and technologies have an impact on how we think about, perform, articulate, and engage in identity practices as social norms,… Selfies, then, become part of the regime of articulating selfhood through selectivity, but they are not without critique, since

they are subject to friends' criticisms, liking, additional tagging, and further sharing in ways that are not necessarily within our control as authors or users". (Cover, 2016, p. xviii)

Acknowledging the influence of Althusser's interpellation on the intellectual tradition that problematizes the formation of social identity in a critical perspective – notably Michel Foucault and Judith Butler - Cover discusses the analytical benefits of interpellation in relation to the problem of recognition as a ritual that constitutes the social subject:

> "Subjects proceed from interpellation by practicing the rituals of recognition (Althusser, 1971, pp. 161, 162) and perform that constitution or reconstitution in ways that stabilize, albeit awkwardly, over time (Butler, 1991, p. 18). By turning to the hail, the subject comes to be recognized and recognizes herself or himself as a subject within the context of the ideology at play. Interpellation may, of course, fail at any time, given the possibility of misrecognizing to whom it is addressed (Butler, 1997, p. 95), indicating that there must be an acceptance". (Cover, 2016, pp. xvi-xvii)

For our purposes, the main point in Cover's usage of this notion is that interpellation can usefully apply to the study of selfies with one important limitation that has to do with the 'communication format' implicit in it. In Cover's opinion, this format is inadequate to the media practices of the digital age in which consumers are also producers:

> "This process of interpellation makes a certain amount of sense in terms of how identity is acquired and built in ways that are not within our own control or agency. But it does also depend very much on understanding the process within a narrow, outdated, and linear communication format of sender (the metaphorical policeman in Althusser's account), message (the hail, accusation, interpellation, or categorization), and recipient (the subject who is subjectified). Of course, all communication is more complex than this, and the very act of communication has its own forms of subjectification – into identity position of audience, for example. However, in an age of user-generated content, where non-professionals are actively summoned to engage with media processes by contributing to media practices as producer– consumers or what have come to be referred to as prosumers (Bruns, 2008), such processes of interpellation are somewhat further complexified". (Cover, 2016, p. xvii)

The reader familiar with Althusser, may have the impression that Cover reconceptualises interpellation (and interpellation as this notion applies to selfies) in terms of 'participation' rather than e.g. 'summoning', and suggesting a more active role of the subject than is the case in Althusser's formulation. In fact, according to Cover, in the conditions of the digital age

> "….the subject is produced through responding to the invitation to participate in the act of interpellation, not merely confirming identities through the taking and distribution of selfies, but through articulating that interpellation, self-managing the process on behalf of, through and within discourse". (Cover, 2016, p. xvii)

This interpretation of interpellation is problematic, in my view, because it underestimates the role and influence of ideology and, therefore, the independence or autonomy of the subject within the interpellation process itself. For Althusser, '*ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence* (Althusser, 2008 (1971), p. 36). Ideological interpellation is effective because its ideology saturates the imaginary relationship of the subject that believes in it. In this condition, 'recognition' can occur only within the symbolic universe of that particular ideology and alternative possibilities brought about by the subject's 'participation' would be experienced a 'mis-recognition'. The practical possibility of individuals to participate in the social construction of the self in some

sort of 'negotiation' is effaced to the extent that interpellation reflects the saturation of individuals 'imaginary relation with reality' with meanings that are within, rather than without, the symbolical universe of the dominant ideology.

In Althusser's formulation, the effectiveness of interpellation depends on the efficacy with which the Ideological State Apparatus performs the selective inclusion of the individual in the symbolic universe of a particular ideology. By doing this, and through 'recognition', the same 'apparatus' performs the selective construction of the individual in forms that are compatible and functional to that particular universe of meaning, hence precluding the possibility of imagining alternative 'realities'. The analytical question here is to see if, and to what extent, the institutions of the digital age perform the functions of this 'apparatus'.

For the purposes of critical interpretation, the notion of interpellation is valuable not as a description of an empirical state of affair (e.g. communication in the digital age) but as a conceptual model or 'tool' that can be useful to understanding the role of ideology – of any ideology – in the mutual constitution of relations of power and relations of meaning. As a 'tool', this notion is relevant because it introduces the role of ideology in the social construction of reality and the self, describing the process through which individuals are conformed to the ideological 'reality' through the narrowing down of their imaginary relationship with this 'real' within the symbolic limits of the ideological universe.

Reflecting ideology as the 'imaginary relationship between individual and reality', interpellation performs the selective dissolution of indeterminacy associated with the texts that express this relationship, including selfies, within the symbolic limits of a specific ideological 'universe'. By establishing ideological limits to the indeterminacy of the text, and thus to the symbolic representation of alternative realities, this notion is key to studying the nature and influence of these limits in the social construction of the self.

Looking at the works of Goffman and Barthes is useful to understand the nature of this indeterminacy and the social value of interpellation in its ideological dissolution.

Goffman: the problem of reality

Goffman is usually remembered for his study on the presentation of the self, but the point that is neglected is that the problem of presentation emerges from a deeper problem that has to do not with the strategies of the self, but with what I would call the 'problem of reality'. From a social constructionist perspective, reality is a problem because, being socially constructed, it challenges the individual with the problem of integration or exclusion. The individual seeks reassurance about his or her sense of reality before s/he can develop effective strategies of integration or 'presentation of the self'. The perceived success of these strategies, in return, reinforce the sense of reality, contributing to what Berger and Luckman call 'objectification' and 'internalization' of the social world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The fear of isolation, thus, is the fundamental reason why people seek intersubjective reassurance about some basic features of the reality they live in and, in turn, this reassurance is a precondition for the development of effective strategies of integration. This fear and the measures taken to address it are core problems that Goffman discusses in his main texts, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959), *Asylum* (Goffman, 1961), *Stigma* (Goffman, 1963), and *Frame Analysis* (Goffman, 1974). My argument is perhaps more convincing if one looks at Goffman's publication history in reverse: from the problematization of the sense of the real, to the role of social institutions, to the 'strategies' individuals adopt to reassures themselves, to fit it and, in practice, to live in society.

In *Frame Analysis* Goffman developed a method to study individual-society relationships in which he avoids the ontological trap of a single reality. Referring to the works of William James and Alfred Schutz, Goffman suggested that what counts for social analysis is not the

nature of reality but the conditions at which a given state of affairs is considered as 'real' or, more precisely, as part of a reality individuals cannot ignore (Goffman, 1974, p. 2).

Asylum is the text in which the concerns about the relationship between the individual and society are most explicit. Individual agency can be effaced not as a result of a totalitarian ideology, but by the mere working of administrative logic applied to the management of crimes or deviance. Here the problem of adaptation is seen on its negative, the problem of non- or mis-adaptation, and against the background of the relationship between the individual and society as this is defined by the coordinates of prescriptions and sanctions: what is expected and the sanctions that applies if expectations are not met.

In *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman problematized the individual's strategies to adapt and, by adapting, getting a chance to affect social reality. In this strategy, the persona is a fundamental tool to protect the individual from the risks associated with society and the real: from the possibility that social institutions become a threat (like in Asylum) and from the uncertainty about what is real, or the intersubjective grounds that make understanding and social life possible at all. The 'presentation of the self' is not so much about 'faking' but more about the possibility for individuals to be aware of and participate on common grounds that, while establishing roles, conventions, etc. also constitute the practical possibility of mutual understanding and, ultimately, coordinated action. Compared to Debord's 'spectacle', where social change is virtually impossible, Goffman's 'theatrical performance' is a symbolical form of communication for the social negotiation of change.

Since the time when Goffman wrote his texts, the 'digital turn' in the social construction of reality has brought about transformations that make the 'problem of the real' more acute: reality more elusive, conventional strategies of integration less effective and ultimately the fear of isolation more intense.

Notions such as those of 'ontological insecurity' (Giddens, 1991), 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), and 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000), describe the condition of late or high modernity as one of impermanence in which the sense of reality is more elusive and the fear of isolation more acute. The assumption on which Goffman's description seems to rest, and plausible in the days he wrote, is that mediated representations reflect 'personas' 'roles' and 'performances as these are established in direct, non-mediated interaction. In other words, the social reality is still the one of the 'real' world – while now the 'virtual' participates and, according to Baudrillard even substitutes the 'real'. Miller, for example, observes that even if digital communication is not the kind of interaction that Goffman had in mind, his work for the interpretation of selfie is rather fundamental (Miller, 1995). For Hogan, the increased mediatization of the relationship between the individual and an elusive reality only increase the apprehensions associated with the presentation of the self (Hogan, 2010). In the condition of digital/global capitalism, the culture-specific notions of 'politeness and decorum' (Goffman, 1959, p. 231) lose their function in inspiring individual performance.

In these conditions, the online self is as much an opportunity to 'escape' as it is a simulacrum that encapsulates the individual in a simulation which preserves the possibility of freedom only within the boundaries of the semantic universe of digital capitalism - a universe in which the symbolic construction of reality is ultimately inspired by the accumulation of capital.

Barthes: the problem of meaning

If Goffman is concerned about the 'problem of the real' and the perils of oppression associated with it, the core of Barthes' *corpus* (Barthes, 1967 (1953)) (Barthes, 2000 (1957))(Barthes, 1982 (1970)) (Barthes, 1975) (Barthes, 1977) (Barthes, 1981 (1980)) is the concern with the 'problem of meaning'. In a constructivist perspective, meaning is a problem because it is both

the means and the end of human experience of the world. This experience is thus framed within the fundamental paradox of intersubjectivity: the constitution of the subject can occur only within intersubjective systems of signification. In a critical perspective, the same paradox is viewed from a different angle and meaning is a problem because first, it depends on relations and systems of signification that can oppress or emancipate the individual and because second, the process of interpretation itself is dependent on these ambivalent relations.

Barthes's analysis is important for the study of selfying because it problematizes the system of signification within which selfying is a meaningful social practice and, by doing so, it exposes the role of conventions, meanings, myths and ultimately ideological assumptions that this practice, and its practitioners, unwittingly reproduce and re-actualize.

In the part two of *Writing degree Zero*, (Barthes, 1967 (1953)),for example, Barthes discusses writing as an ambivalent reality:

> "… on the one hand, it unquestionably arises from a confrontation of the writer with the society of his time; on the other hand, from this social finality, it refers the writer back, by a sort of tragic reversal, to the sources, that is to say, the instruments of creation". (Barthes, 1967 (1953), p. 16)

This ambivalence is the ground for his critique of 'the communist mode of writing' that seeks to bring radical social change but whose literature cannot liberate itself from 'a form which is after all typically bourgeois' (Barthes, 1967 (1953), p. 70).

In *Mythologies,* and especially in its second part, 'Myth today' (Barthes, 2000 (1957)), Barthes discussed the process of visual re-production of myth and the idea that the political role of myths is always supporting a representation of the past that is conservative and illusory but that ultimately serves the political interests of the bourgeoisie (Barthes, 2000 (1957), p. 142). Through the actualization of myths and their symbolical latent associations, the ideology of the bourgeoisie effaces all concepts and, therefore, the communicative possibility of meanings that are not compatible with its ideology. As we shall see, this is an important point to understand the social effect of selfying and the mythologization of the individual in the digital age.

The notions of 'studium' and 'punctum', that Barthes discussed in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1981 (1980)) introduce remarkable elements of complexity to the analysis of the visual dimension of selfying by merely identifying two separate, but co-present, dimensions of visual interpretation: the subjective (punctum) and the intersubjective or social (studium). Among the many insights Barthes' work has to offer in the domain of the visual construction of meaning, one of the most interesting one is the association of the photographic image with violence and death. Susan Sontag discussed this idea in On Photography, arguing that

> "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time". (Sontag, 2008 (1977), pp. 4-5)

Quoting Susan Sontag, Rettberg claims that selfies are a way of taking back the power of photography (Rettberg, 2014, p. 88) - but Barthes's engagement with photography, and perhaps a broader engagement with Sontag too, suggests that this power is indeed influential but is not easily accessible to the individual. This power is very complex and, in order to be accessible, it involves much more than the visual image and access to technology. The belief that any individual can master this power and control its technological, ideological and symbolic ramification is itself a sign of the influence of myths about the individual that are instrumentally revitalized in the conditions of digital capitalism.

And, in fact, the whole quotation from Sontag explicitly refers to the use of photography and the power of images as a defensive mechanism against anxiety…:

> "Recently, photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing – which means that, like every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool for power". (Sontag, 2008 (1977), p. 8)

This time is presumably the time of 'late capitalism', on the verge of the 'digital revolution' by the time Sontag wrote these lines. Later, and well into the digital age, the same connection between the image/signifier and the death of signified will be reformulated by Jean Baudrillard in his discussion of the perfect crime and the regime of simulation (Baudrillard, 1994) (Baudrillard, 2007).

From Barthes's standpoint, the social significance of selfies consists in the dialectics of the text: the process by which the text constitutes the subject but, in doing so, it also links it up to conventions that are necessary for the comprehension of the text itself but hide relations of meanings and relations of power that ultimately affect the subject.

The whole work of Barthes reflects perhaps his personal effort to elucidate this mechanism, and evading its effects on himself. The fascination with the Japanese character Mu and its representation of 'nothingness' in *Empire of the Sign* (Barthes, 1982 (1970)) may be itself a 'sign' that 'nothingness' is precisely what individuals have to be prepared to face in their quest to free relations of meaning from relations of power. Terry Eagleton argues in similar ways about freedom in *Holy Terror* (Eagleton, 2005).

Discussing *The Pleasure of the Text*, Cover suggests that 'subjects engage in identity work through the simultaneous reception and production of texts of the self, such as selfies, because there is a pleasure in the performativity of conformable identities' (Cover, 2016, p. xvii). This interpretation, however, contrasts with Barthes's belief that the 'pleasure of the text' or the 'bliss' that links text to its reader in a process that is in some respects transformative of both, is impossible in the conditions of 'mass culture' (Barthes, 1975, p. 38). The pleasure of 'performing identities through texts of the self' and the 'pleasure of the text' are different forms of pleasures originating from different relations between the text and the self. Whereas Cover discusses the former in terms of his concept of 'interpellation' I described above (Cover, 2016, p. xvii), for Barthes 'it is obvious that the pleasure of the text is scandalous: not because it is immoral but because it is atopic' (Barthes, 1975, p. 23).

Conclusion: selfying as interpellation in digital capitalism

The problem of reality and the problem of meaning are constitutive of the social construction of reality, self and society, and engage the individual with fundamental questions of indeterminacy. Indeterminacy, on the other hand, is a condition that people experience as freedom or insecurity depending on their social positioning: their relative position in the structure of power. Interpreting *selfying as a form of interpellation, and selfie a 'signifier' that produces its 'signified'*, is an epistemic 'move' that makes it possible to study the role of ideology in the symbolic resolution of this indeterminacy and, more broadly, in the social construction of reality, self and society.

In this 'move', Althusser's notion of interpellation has the advantage to interpret ideology as an 'imaginary relation' between the individual and reality. The works of Goffman and Barthes provide distinctive insights into the aspects of indeterminacy affecting both the ends and the means of the social construction of reality, self and society. To interpret 'selfying-as-

interpellation' is useful to actualize and engage the challenges of indeterminacy as these become even more acute in the conditions of the digital age.

From the starting point of my working hypothesis, it is perhaps useful to suggest three further points. First, selfying is a form of communication and a social practice that tells not so much about the individual himself or herself but about his or her 'imaginary relation with reality'. Second, and in so doing, this practice contributes to establish this imaginary as a collective imaginary or, more precisely as a form of interpellation 'from below'. Third, the emancipative potential of selfying as a form of mediated presentation of the self is problematic, not least because the intelligibility of this practice itself depends on conventions (social, technological, semiotic, etc.) that participates in the reproduction of the 'imaginary relation with reality' of digital capitalism.

Based on this approach, and in line with the normative prescriptions of critical social theory, further research avenues should perhaps address: a) the impact of selfying and its 'power' as a form of interpellation, b) its implications on the influence of capitalism in the social construction of reality, self and society, and c) the grounds for resistance.

Concerning the social influence of selfying-as-interpellation, my analysis suggests that this practice is influential because in the conditions of enhanced indeterminacy of the digital age, it offers ontological security but only within the symbolic universe of capitalist ideology. Selfying-as-interpellation allows for the ideological resolution of the indeterminacy associated with the problem of the real and the problem of meaning. By involving the individual in a form of communication that offers the possibility of managing the online-self within the ideological coordinates of promotional culture and digital consumerism, selfying provides the individual with implicit answers to fundamental questions concerning reality, self and society which the individual himself/herself is unable or unwilling to answer. By accepting the symbolic universe of capitalist ideology, in other words, people can concentrate on the effort to try and be happy within it. The other side of this deal, however, is that in the recognition of the implied self of this interpellation, capitalist ideology produces individuals compatible with its universe.

This interpretation contains bad and good news.

The bad news is that digital capitalism is far more entrenched in the social construction of reality and the emancipative affordances of selfying (and presumably other forms of online presentation of the self) are far less significant that some studies would suggest. Here I suggested that the main reason for this influence is the capacity of digital/global capitalism to address the indeterminacy of the digital age as an existential condition that most people experience as a condition of insecurity and anxiety rather than one of freedom and emancipation. In this way, offering 'ontological security' in exchange for freedom, capitalism preserves the conditions for its own survival and against the inherent possibility for chances associated with the social construction of reality, the individual and society. Thus, far from being an 'enabling' practice of self-representation or even less, a sign of greater freedom in the visual construction of the self, selfying is fundamentally a form of interpellation and an effective ideological institution of the digital age. It is effective because it is 'distributed': based on spontaneous individual behaviours and dependent on a technological infrastructure that is there for other purposes. In this form of interpellation, the individual is both an agent of the 'apparatus' and the target of a self-supporting, commercially profitable form of visual presentation of the self compatible with the ideological appropriation of digital technology by capitalism.

The good news, conversely, is perhaps that indeterminacy is an inherent feature of this process and the 'problem of the real' and the 'problem of meaning' cannot be resolved once and for all: the door to the construction of social world in alternative symbolic universes remains open. The critical study of selfying in terms of interpellation may contribute to raising awareness about the role of ideology and, in this way, keep that door open. The permanence of

this indeterminacy is an important aspect of critical socio-constructionists approaches that can contribute to bring the attention of research to the possibility of disrupting capitalist interpellation, for example through Feenberg's 'subversive rationalization' (Feenberg, 1992), or re-formulations of Paulo Freire's 'critical pedagogy' (Giroux, 2011).

References

Althusser, L. (2008 [1971]). *On Ideology.* London: Verso.

Barthes, R. (1967 [1953]). *Writing degree zero. Or. tit. Le degré zéro de l'écriture. Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith.* London: Jonathan Cape.

Barthes, R. (1975). *The Pleasure of the Text. Tit. or. Le plaisir du texte. Trans. Richard Howard.* New York: Hill and Wang.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, Music Text. Trans. Stephen Heath.* New york: Hill and Wang.

Barthes, R. (1981) (1980). *Camera Lucida. Tit. Or. La Chambre Claire. Trans. Richard Howard.* New York: Hill and Wang.

Barthes, R. (1982 [1970]). *Empire of Signs. Tit. or. L'Empire des signes. Trans. Richard Howard.* New York: Hill and Wang.

Barthes, R. (2000 [1957]). *Mythologies.* London: Vintage. trans Annette Lavers. Original edition Paris 1957.

Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation.* Ann Arbour: The University of Michigan Press. Translation by Sheila Faria Glaser..

Baudrillard, J. (2007). *The Perfect Crime.* New York: Verso.

Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid Modernity.* Cambridge: Polity.

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity.* London: Sage.

Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* London: Penguin.

Bourdieu, P. (1998). The Essence of neoliberalism. *Le Monde diplomatique*, December.

Cover, R. (2016). *Digital Indentities. Creating and Communicating the Online Self.* London: Elsevier.

Eagleton, T. (2005). *Holy terror.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Feenberg, A. (1992). Subversive Rationalization: Technology, Power and Democracy. *Inquiry,* pp. 301-22.

Gergen, K. J. (2011). The Self as Social Construction. *Psychological Studies,* 56(1), pp. 108-116. CrossRef

Giddens, A. (199)1. *Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Giroux, H. A. (2011). *On Critical Pedagogy.* New York: Continuum.

Goffman, E. (1959). *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylum. Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates.* New York: Doubleday.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identities.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience.* New York: Harper & Row.

Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and Human Interests. Or. tit. Erkenntnis und Interesse (1968).* Boston: Beacon Press.

Halpern, D., Valenzuela, S. & Katz, J. E. (2016). "Selfie-ists" or "Narci-selfiers"?: A cross-lagged panel analysis of selfie taking and narcissism. *Personality and Individual Differences,* Volume 97, pp. 98-101. CrossRef

Hogan, B. (2010). The presentation of self in the age of social media: distinguishing performances and exhibitions online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society,* 30(6), pp. 377-386. CrossRef

Huang, R.-T. (2018). What motivates people to continuously post selfies? The moderating role of perceived relative advantage. *Computers in Human Behavior,* Volume 80, pp. 103-111. CrossRef

Kapidzic, S. (2013). Narcissism as a predictor of motivations behind Facebook profile picture selection. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking,* Volume 16, p. 14–19. CrossRef

Kedzior, R., Allen, D. E. & Schroeder, J. (2016). The selfie phenomenon – consumer identities in the social media marketplace. *European Journal of Marketing,* 50(9/10), pp. 1767-1772. CrossRef

Kedzior, R. & Allen, D. E. (2016). From liberation to control: understanding the selfie experience. *European Journal of Marketing,* 50(9/10), pp. 1893-1902. CrossRef

Kim, J. W. & Chock, T. M. (2017). Personality traits and psychological motivations predicting selfie posting behaviors on social networking sites. *Telematics and Informatics,* 34(5), pp. 560-571. CrossRef

Lee, J. A. & Sung, Y. (2016). Hide-and-seek: Narcissism and "selfie"-related behavior.. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking,* Volume 19, p. 347–351. CrossRef

Lyu, S. O. (2016). Travel selfies on social media as objectified self-presentation. *Tourism Management,* Volume 54, pp. 185-195. CrossRef

McCain, J. L. et al. (2016). Personality and selfies: Narcissism and the Dark Triad. *Computers in Human Behavior,* Volume 64, p. 126–133. CrossRef

Miller, H. (1995). *Hugh Miller, 1995. The Presentation of Self in Electronic Life: Goffman on the Internet. Paper presented at Embodied Knowledge and Virtual Space Conference Goldsmiths' College, University of London.* [Online] Available at: http://smg.media.mit.edu [Accessed 10 september 2018].

Montag, W. (2017). Althusser's Empty Signifier: What is the Meaning of the Word 'Interpellation'?. *Mediations,* 30(2), pp. 63-68.

Moon, J. H. et al. (2016). The role of narcissism in self-promotion on Instagram. *Personality and Individual Differences,* Volume 101, pp. 22-25. CrossRef

Poletti, A. & Rak, J. (2014). *eds Identity technologies: construction the Self Online..* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Pounders, K., Kowalczyk, C. M. & Stowers, K. (2016). Insight into the motivation of selfie postings: impression management and self-esteem. *European Journal of Marketing,* 50(9/10), pp. 1879-1892. CrossRef

Rettberg, J. W. (2014). *Seeing Ourselves through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rokka, J. & Canniford, R. (2016). Heterotopian selfies: how social media destabilizes brand assemblages. *European Journal of Marketing,* 50(9/10), pp. 1789-1813. CrossRef

Schwarz, O. (2010). On friendship, boobs and the logic of the catalogue: Online self-portraits as a means for the exchange of capital. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies,* 16(2), p. 163–183. CrossRef

Senft, T. M. & Baym, N. K. (2015). What Does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon. *International Journal of Communication,* Volume 9, p. 1588–1606.

Singh, S., Farley, S. D. & Donahue, J. J. (2018). Grandiosity on display: Social media behaviors and dimensions of narcissism. *Personality and Individual Differences,* Volume 134, p. 308–313. CrossRef

Sontag, S. (2008 [1977]). *On Photography.* London: Penguin.

Sorokowski, P. et al. (2015). Selfie posting behaviors are associated with narcissism among men. *Personality and Individual Differences,* Volume 85, p. 123–127. CrossRef

Sung, Y., Lee, J.-A., Kim, E. & Choi, S. M. (2016). Why we post selfies: Understanding motivations for posting pictures of oneself. *Personality and Individual Differences,* Volume 97, p. 260–265. CrossRef

Tiidenberg, K. (2015). Boundaries and conflict in a NSFW community on tumblr: The meanings and uses of selfies. *New Media & Society,* 18(8), p. 1563–1578. CrossRef

Twenge, J. M. & Campbell, K. W. (2009). *The Narcissism Epidemic. Living in the Age of Entitlement.* New York: Free Press.

Warfield, K., Cambre, C. & Abidin, C. (2016). Introduction to the Social Media + Society Special Issue on Selfies: Me-diated Inter-faces, *Social Media + Society,* pp. 1-5. CrossRef

Weiser, E. B. (2015). #Me: Narcissism and its facets as predictors of selfie-posting frequency. *Personality and Individual Differences,* Volume 86, p. 477–481. CrossRef

Weng, M. L. (2016). Understanding the selfie phenomenon: current insights and future research directions. *European Journal of Marketing,* 50(9/10), pp. 1773-1788. CrossRef

Wernick, A. (1991). *Promotional Culture. Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression.* London: Sage.

Veum, A. & Moland Undrum, L. V. (2018). The selfie as a global discourse. *Discourse & Society,* 29(1), p. 86–103. CrossRef