

# Keeping up with the Cartesians: on the culture of the selfie with continual reference to Kim Kardashian.

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Is there anyone reading this who did not spend some time online in the last 24 hours? The question is, how does it feel. Perhaps it does not feel like the first time, as we are so used to it. But on second thoughts, it is rather different from most other things. Sitting at my desk, I can say that the book is nearer to me than the coffee cup, and that the armchair is more far away than the phone. But what does it mean to say that online something is nearer to me and something is more distant? Online distance is not measured in meters or feet, it is measured in clicks, swipes, flicks and taps. How many clicks it takes to buy this book on Amazon? How many swipes to get to the news feed? Pinching and dragging, flicking and swiping might be words previously used to describe the playground bully, but now these are the coordinates of a new territory and a new economy in which a Twitter bot can run a country and computer hack can change governments.

The binary conventions of political reality – for instance: democrats against republicans - give way to ever closer alignment of biological and artificial neural networks, and of social and computer codes, that is never more visible than in the phenomenon of the selfie. Both the analogue and the digital snapshot still belong to the industrial age, in which the greatest threat to humanity was the man-machine hybrid – the Frankenstein’s monster who turns on his own maker. But as the online philosopher Kim Kardashian teaches by inviting us to look at her through touching, pinching, and swiping, the man-machine paradigm is now replaced by wo/man-image. This is not only a change in the status of the image, it is also, and for the most part, a change in the status of ‘man’. That is because the gendered language in the previous sentence is another direct consequence of the demand issued by Descartes to maintain clear separation between mind and body, in which the mind always has the upper hand. Since Descartes, the human being is defined by the ability to think rationally and to doubt everything, which just happens to be the preferred pastime of white men of a certain age. For the Cartesian, the only appropriate way to study the world is by forming an image of it in one’s mind’s eye. Take for example *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin: the massive head over the immobile body contemplating the world from a distance. In Kardashian’s Instagram stream on the other hand, the image/body opposition is overcome in favor of a new world order that merges looking and touching. Following in the footsteps of Nietzsche who proclaimed ‘the death of god’ The Kardashian selfie makes us take seriously the question of the death of the man, and ask what new friendships,

temporary allegiances, one night stands and battle lines are called for in this mutual interdependence of 'post-wo/man' and image.

Before the age of the selfie, photography was mostly dominated by pictures of historical events, operating as an extension of human memory. But selfies eliminate distance and shrink time to an instant because they proliferate both vertically and horizontally, not only propagating one's Instagram stream, but also spreading via copy, repetition, and self-replication. As the image exists only as a transmission of signals shuttling back and forth between nodal points, the selfie also obliterates the distinction between the author and audience, making everyone a participant, and between past and present, as both are equally available, perfectly preserved for eternity as data. Because of this non-linear notion of time in which future is the recording of the past, selfies draw attention not so much to human memory but to the fluctuating forces that connect human bodies to machines, algorithms and networks.

Selfies also remind us that we have the duty not only to record and represent the world, but also to actively engage with it by connecting and sharing with other human beings. When Martin Heidegger attended to the question of sharing he considered a jug. Like the selfie, the jug has the ability to share its contents, and for Heidegger in the outpouring of the wine from the jug the essence of being human *as sharing* is disclosed: 'In the gift of the pour, the earth and sky abide. In the gift of the pour there abides at the same time earth and sky, divinities and mortals. These four, united in themselves, belong together'. For Heidegger, the materiality of the jug is expressive of all the essential components of human life: earth, water, fire, ritual, culture and art combine in the simple gesture of pouring from the jug. The gesture of the selfie is equally telling of life as intersubjective feedback loop, for it is making visible the essential components of the network, which are not earth and water, but bits of data. These bits of data are organized not according to Descartes' mind/body dualism, but according to code, and therefore the pictures formed by these bits of data are descriptive of the new categories of thought, art, play and action that these codes make possible.

It is even possible that by looking carefully at the selfie we can discern the future shape of our own species – not as individuals connected to each other via social fabric, governed by self-interest and competition, but as nodal points formed out of cross-fertilization between human and artificial intelligence. The question is not whether this picture of ourselves as immaterial and imperishable is terrifying or comforting. The selfie fractured the shell of modern individuality founded on the false certainty of the body-image dualism: an image is not a body, and a body is not an image. The selfie is not only a picture of someone's body, it is also a fragment of the second-degree body, the synthetic trans-subjective entity that is formed through dialogue between electric currents passing through synapses in the brain and microchips in motherboards. Kardashian's selfie stream shapes clear and lucid pictures out of this trans-subjective experience, offering a keyhole view of a post-individual existence that is dedicated to calculated creativity that consists of processing and combining data derived from human and non-human sources.

This strange cross-species connectivity is establishing a new collectivity that is sending shock waves through a society that insists on thinking in fixed, binary categories. The selfie might be seen as the first expression of a new political grammar, one that is not structured on a binary axis of rich and poor, black and white, or progressive and conservative, but instead offers specific insights into the nature of reality that speculative reason, logic, and rationality alone cannot grasp. This is not because the selfie can have multiple meanings, but because the selfie shows what happens to meaning when it is detached from the structure of the sign (signifier / signified) and aligned instead with the contemporary experience of post-truth, or – which is the same thing – of digital-born images created and served via feedback loops that recombine visuals, texts and sounds into malleable mashups that flow through the screens of smartphones, laptops and tablets.

Selfie is defined by Oxford Dictionary as ‘A photograph that one has taken of oneself ... and shared via social media’, which suggests that unlike ordinary photograph, it is not aimed at recording the past but at creating a different future by recombining recorded data to produce new and previously unimaginable mashups. The selfie is subversive because the distinction between life and image is being erased: sharing is not something that happens as an afterthought, but almost the other way around: it is the desire to share and to be shared that manifests itself in the production of the image. This reversal calls for a new, reinvented conception of a community – not as a collection of individuals united by a shared goal, but as a scrollable feedback loop that does not seek to obtain objective mastery over nature, but to attain a more than ordinary state of being. In this new community neither the image nor the person making it are given in advance, instead they are formed by bio-digital processes that create the worlds and the lives of all the participants in the network. Two logics that have been kept separate for millennia are brought together and form an image that allows us to experience an inconvenient truth, namely that every rational act is also a sensual act, because here the representational logic states ‘this is I’ precisely at the same time (and space) that the logic of sharing, of intimacy and of ecstatic desire screams ‘this is now!’.

But what – one might ask – is being shared in the sharing of the selfie? Are we talking about pixels, packets of data, algorithms or information? Not at all. Once we cease to try to understand the selfie in terms of representation we are free to explore its condition of self-replication without any metaphysical baggage. The right question to ask is not ‘what the selfie represents’ but ‘where is it’, as it is the later question that opens up the possibility of conceiving the selfie as a field of synchronized appearances impervious to the laws of space, time and history. The selfie is not only similar to itself in all its iterations on various screens and devices, it is also self-similar to and different from all other selfies. Type ‘selfie’ into your favorite image search engine and you will be looking at a wall of pictures, an on-the-fly archive of poses, postures, identities... but this is not all. There is something else there, something less visible than the pictures but not less real or tangible. This something is the difference between the selfies, a difference that can only become manifest due to their self-similarity. This is finally what is being shared: not the picture of a face, a six pack or a protruding arm, but a

difference that is emerging out of an archive of self-similar selfies. The real purpose of Kardashian's Instagram stream might be not to preserve memories and construct identities, but to produce in the viewer the experience of difference. Wikipedia says that the universe is 84.5% dark matter, yet it cannot be directly observed. Like dark matter, difference cannot be directly observed, but its existence can be inferred from the effects produced by images online.

It is this difference between selves, that overcomes identity as the ideological linchpin of society, and allows for a prolific multiplicity of assemblages and for the creation of new communities to which the old political categories of 'left' and 'right' do not apply. What is being shared in the act of the selfie is the possibility of detaching the image from its foundations in Platonic metaphysical unity and the chance of overcoming the representational force of photography. The selfie opens up a possibility of a future that is not bound to traditions of representation and memory, but instead proliferates via the network expressed through the plurality of its fragments. What we see in the selfie stream is not Kardashian's self-portrait, but how the future present is being created. When dreams and fantasies are made of pixels and controlled by algorithms it might be time to ask what new forms of fight, creativity and resistance are called for.